

Nobody Cared  
by Jayne d'Arcy

Disclaimer: Snape and Harry belong to JK Rowling. I hope she doesn't mind if I borrow them a bit.

Summary: Harry misses the Hogwarts Express and it is Severus Snape who must go and escort the spoiled brat to school. What he finds is almost more than he can deal with.

A/N: I have been wanting to do a Harry!Beaten/Snape Comforts story for quite some time. I had not felt comfortable with Harry to do him justice in such a story, thus my other Snape mentors/adopts/Sevitus stories.

Aug. 31, 1991 - Night

His family didn't care. Not about him. If he suffered that was just fine by the Dursleys. Curled up in his cupboard, with the tatty old quilt that he'd been wrapped in when he was a baby, Harry Potter shivered and tried to pretend that he wasn't crying softly.

Uncle Vernon had burned it. Everything. Every page of every book for the classes at what would have been his new school of Hogwarts, was gone. His new clothing, his robes, the wonderful, leather boots he'd found at the second hand store. Those were gone, too.

Oh god! And his wand! It had made him feel so very safe and for once, unafraid, as he held it, but Uncle Vernon had angrily broken it under his foot, grinding it into slivers of wood and a mangled phoenix feather. Harry now had those pieces clutched in his hand.

And Hedwig?

Harry's throat hitched and he gulped back the noise of his crying.

No. He hadn't lost the beautiful snowy owl, his very first gift ever, to his Uncle's impotent rage. Hedwig, such a smart bird that she was, had bitten Uncle Vernon's fingers as he'd tried to drag her from her cage. For a heart-sickening moment, when it seemed Uncle Vernon solidly held the angry owl, Harry was certain that would have been it for his familiar.

Harry rarely pleaded anymore. It never worked and only managed to make his uncle angrier, and prolong his punishments. He had fallen to his knees, clasped his hands together in abject subjugation, and had begged for the life of his beloved familiar.

Vernon was caught off guard by Harry's utterly sincere entreaty, and so his grip on the owl slipped, just a tiny bit. To Harry's absolute joy, Hedwig not only gave the beefy man several sharp stabs in quick succession to the Muggle's hand with her sharp beak, but the owl had dug her needle-like claws into that same hand before taking off with a screech and disappearing upwards into the sky.

His uncle's fury had become worse, but Harry was so thankful that Hedwig had escaped, that he felt none of the blows from his uncle's fists.

Now, though, in the shadows of the small cupboard that had been his since he could remember, his body throbbed in painful protest in various places. Tears dropped upon the baby crib mattress, but Harry did not give in to the desire to let out gulping, anguished sobs. As he bent nearly double over his arms wrapped over his belly, he kept the hurt and the pain to himself.

Hedwig? Are you all right? Where did you go? Only weeks had passed but for Harry the time had crawled by as his aunt and uncle took out their anger at the letters, at Hagrid, and all his freaky magic on him. He fell asleep wondering, not for the first time, what he'd done to make his relatives hate him so.

Sept. 1, 1991 - Morning

Harry was sharply awakened the next morning by his Aunt Petunia who had kicked the door of the cabinet to jar him from a heavy, pain induced slumber. That was the closest she ever came to touching her nephew whom she looked upon as a piece of filth she was unable to scrape or scrub away. Unsympathetically, the thin, pinch-faced woman watched as Harry hobbled as quickly as he could to the downstairs bathroom. He was able to wash his face and to empty his bladder before his aunt's exasperated voice hurried him.

"Take this!" Petunia ordered shoving a glass of water and two aspirin at her nephew.

Harry sighed, but obediently took the medication. It never helped. None of the cough syrups, or pills, or aspirins his aunt did deign to give him ever did what they were supposed to do. At least his body did a fair job of healing itself.

"Hurry up and cook breakfast, Boy," ordered his aunt as she headed up the stairs. "This is an important day for Dudley."

Head bowed, Harry hurried into the kitchen and began to pull out all of his cousin's favorite breakfast foods.

Of course it's an important day for Dudley, Harry mused within his mind. Dudley was going off to a prestigious school that cost lots of money. Harry would have been going off to the mysterious Hogwarts today, as well, if his uncle hadn't burned everything and chased his familiar away.

Later, while the Dursleys ate the overly sumptuous breakfast and fussed over their son, Harry was shuffled off outside with a piece of toast, the last of the milk in the jug, which smelled kind of funny, and a list of chores to be done that day.

It was nearly noon and Harry was spreading fertilizer and wood chips to prepare his aunt's garden for winter. A hoot from the tree behind him distracted Harry momentarily. With a wary smile, he peered through the sun's rays to the snowy owl that perched upon one of the branches.

"Hedwig!" Harry was ever so pleased to see his familiar. Knowing that she was alive soothed much of the hurt over his lost wizarding possessions. The bird flapped down to his shoulder and nudged her head gently against his bruised cheek. "I sure hope you got something to eat," he murmured as he rubbed his bare wrist against the owl's breast. His hands were covered by large, garden gloves.

Hedwig hooted softly several times and then dropped something in his lap.

"What's this?" asked the small boy as he shucked off his gloves and picked up the neat, small envelope of parchment. He turned it over

and noted a red seal stamped with a curious insignia of a snake in the shape of an "S".

Once more Hedwig hooted and then flew back up into the tree just as Harry broke the seal and unfolded the envelope to reveal a short note. He settled on the ground and began to read.

Mr. Potter,

Please present yourself this evening at 7 o'clock sharp to be escorted to Hogwarts School of Witchcraft & Wizardry. Your trunk is to be packed and you are to be wearing your school robes. If you are not ready, I shall be terribly displeased.

The Headmaster, who is no less busy than anyone else, has requested that I take time out of my own busy schedule to escort you to school. I expect a full explanation as to your most discourteous behavior in not having arrived at Hogwarts as your fellows did.

Severus Snape  
Professor of Potions  
Hogwarts

With an aggrieved sigh, Harry folded up the letter and tucked it into the pocket of his overlarge jeans.

"He doesn't sound like a nice sort," muttered Harry as he bent back to his gardening. He knew that whatever that Headmaster or what's-his-problem-snarky Snape wanted of him wasn't going to happen. By seven he'd be hidden away in his cupboard while his aunt and uncle watched television. Snape would get a rude awakening when Uncle Vernon told him that the freak wasn't going to school because freaks were too dumb to waste money for school on!

Sept. 1, 1991 - Early Evening

Harry was caught off guard at five o'clock when he went to wash up so he could get dinner ready for Aunt Petunia and Uncle Vernon. Aunt Petunia was all dressed up and flittering about the house with an insipid smile upon her face. When she took a moment to notice Harry, she scowled.

"Into your cupboard, Boy! Vernon and I are going out to dinner tonight to celebrate and we don't need to see a reminder of you at any time this evening. So, keep it quiet!"

"Yes, Aunt Petunia," Harry crouched down and dutifully entered his cupboard. Just as his aunt was about to lock the door, Harry entreated, "Please, Aunt? Can't I have some dinner?"

Petunia slammed the cupboard shut and Harry yelped as his fingertips had been caught. "You're a burden, Boy! You'll get nothing tonight!" The lock clicked thoroughly with a sharp snick and moments later, Petunia was heading up the stairs for some last minute primping.

Harry curled up on his side on the thin mattress, drawing his injured fingers to his chest and cradling them. Silent tears dripped onto the mattress as his fingers throbbed painfully.

Hagrid, the giant who had delivered his letter and taken him to Diagon Alley for all his wondrous new things, had told him how his parents had really died. An evil wizard had killed them, but his spell to kill Harry had backfired, leaving him alive with the curious lightning bolt scar upon his forehead and the evil wizard dead. As the child closed his wet eyes, he wished very much that the evil wizard had killed him, too.

Sept. 1, 1991 - Ten minutes to 7pm

Severus Snape was rarely in a pleasant mood and this errand that he'd been cajoled into by the headmaster made any potential pleasantries run, screaming, in the other direction. Because of a foolish vow he'd made, one night, to Lily, he was now on his way to Little Whinging, #4 Privet Drive.

It seemed that Harry Potter, the arrogant son of James Potter, had taken it upon himself to not join all the other first years on the Hogwarts Express. The spoiled brat had, it seemed, decided to stay home, making this journey by Snape necessary. The note that he'd sent after breakfast had been an afterthought when the unknown snowy owl had shown up in front of him at the Great Hall.

"Oh dear," sighed Dumbledore as he spotted the pure white owl now looking expectantly at his Potions professor.

"What?" snapped Snape. He been preparing for the new term late into the night and had gotten very little sleep.

"If I am not mistaken, I do believe that owl belongs to Harry Potter," sighed the Headmaster. The bird pecked at Snape's bacon and he growled at it. Hedwig merely hooted and snatched the piece the wizard held between his fingers. The Headmaster had laughed and Snape was prepared to cast some sort of wandless, silent spell at the older man. Maybe something to make his shorts itchy.

"Oh, do lighten up my boy," chided the Headmaster. Snape huffed, wondering, if once again the man was psychic. Snape knew Dumbledore would never use Legilimency on him; he was too good an Occlumens. "After all, we did discuss the problem of Mr. Potter this morning and you..."

"Yes, yes, yes," Snape waved his hand, both to shoo away the owl and to shut the Headmaster up. "I have already agreed, have I not, Headmaster?"

"That you did, Severus, and I am quite grateful that you will be looking after the young boy. I've no doubt he will need someone to look..." The rest went unheard as Snape's attention had been diverted by a distinct, scathing sort of snort coming from the Deputy Headmistress and Head of Gryffindor House.

"Have you something to add, Minerva?" asked Severus slyly. The older woman's tight expression practically dripped contempt towards Albus Dumbledore and it intrigued the elder Slytherin.

"Those... Muggles," she snapped under her breath. "I knew they were the worst sort..."

Albus interrupted, "And I did explain, my dear, that the Blood Wards were important to the child's survival. That, and you cannot honestly tell me that Petunia Dursley would turn away her only sister's child. Lily adored Petunia!"

That, it seemed, was the end of that. Snape, knowing what he knew about Petunia Evans, added that knowledge to what little Minerva

had said, and was now, at least, curious to know what had kept Harry Potter from the train and thus from coming to Hogwarts. Curiosity aside, though, he was still put out that he was nothing more than the Headmaster's errand boy, and if that child did not have a reasonable explanation, well, he would rue the day, that was for certain. So inspired, Snape penned the small note, and gave it to the obnoxious owl, and Hedwig flew off, leaving the Potions Master to the remains of his breakfast in peace.

Snape had Apparated to Privet Drive, without a thought to changing his robes into those of Muggle wear. After all, he had instructed the boy to wear his robes, so it would be inconsistent if he'd insisted upon the wizarding clothing, yet had not shown up himself properly attired.

A simple Disillusionment Spell solved the problem of any Muggles seeing him, and he marched up to #4, and was immediately fuming as he saw no sign of life at the little house. Not a single lamp was lit either within or without. No one, it seemed, was at home. Snape nearly turned sharply on his heel when he heard the hooting of Potter's damned owl. To his surprise, the owl, perched upon the roof, swooped down from the top of the house and onto Snape's shoulder. She then nipped his ear, eliciting a gruff exclamation of outrage from the wizard.

"Watch it!" he admonished as the owl flew away. "I know several potions that are enhanced by owl livers!"

Hedwig had not resumed her perch, but was now precariously settled on the black mailbox to the right of the door. She pecked the door for several seconds and then looked towards the wizard. She let out an ear-splitting screech, as one might hear from an owl triumphant in her hunt.

"Quiet!" snapped Snape. He watched the owl as she pecked again at the door. Thankfully, this time she only hooted, and gave the Potions Master what could only be an imploring glance with her wide, yellow eyes.

Snape frowned, now his curiosity was more than just piqued. An apprehensive air settled uneasily around him as he made his way to the white painted front door. "Alohomora!" he whispered. The simple lock snicked and the door slowly swung open.

The interior of the Dursley house was dark and quiet. Snape had his wand out, holding it in front of himself defensively. He cast a complicated spell that would cause the exterior appearance of a darkened house to remain the same as it had been. Once that was accomplished, Snape cast the Lumos spell, lighting the tip of his wand with a bright light that gave him enough light to traverse the first floor of the house.

All was empty. Quiet. Still. As he walked towards the kitchen, though, his very sensitive nose picked up on a smell he was only too familiar with. The smell that sometimes pervaded the boys dormitory in Slytherin when they chose not to clean their spaces and beds. Unwashed clothing, sweat, filth. But, there was something else as well, and this had the hairs on the back of Snape's neck rising with foreboding. He could smell blood. Old, but with it was the unmistakable reek of sickness and infection.

Another spell was cast to amplify the disagreeable odours so that the wizard could better identify them. The sickness and infection were old, as was some of the blood, but the sharp copper told him that there was new to join the old. It was though someone had not washed their clothing or bedding in between those times when they were ill, or hurt. A child. A neglected child. It sickened Snape and he cancelled the amplification spell so he would be better able to ignore the offensive odours. Besides, he knew where it was coming from, now.

Snape stared down at a small door set beneath the stairs. A cupboard used to store cleaning chemicals, perhaps rags, a bucket and or a mop or broom. Snape recalled a similar such cabinet underneath the stairs in the old house he'd grown up in. He had hidden there, many times, from his father when he was in his cups and needed to hit something. Preferably Snape. Seeing this cupboard door, coupled with the offensive odours, Snape found he couldn't immediately continue with his investigation.

What if the Boy-Who-Lived was in that cupboard? What if the child of Lily Evans wasn't the arrogant prat he expected, but was an abused child? What would Snape do if he discovered someone whose childhood mirrored his own?



It wasn't as though Severus Snape hadn't dealt with other children from abused homes. It was an unfortunate statistic that those children suffering abuse tended to be sorted into Slytherin because they developed very Slytherinish traits in an effort to survive a less than ideal home life. Snape was Hogwarts greatest advocate as far as his Snakes went, and he was even more protective of those children he discovered were hurting. Unlike the other Heads of Houses, Snape kept a sharp eye on his Snakes, children that he considered, without hesitation, to be his own. He was strict, assigned bedtimes, and age appropriate punishments. Within the House of the Snakes he had devised a neat network of prefects, older students who had proved themselves capable, to help him in watching over and taking care of the younger students, and rules for all his Snakes to adhere to.

The prejudice of the other Houses against Slytherin hadn't changed much since he was a student at Hogwarts, but Snape had always done his best to protect his Snakes from such prejudices. The fact that Harry Potter, the son of the reviled bully and self-proclaimed "Marauder against Slytherins" James Potter, could actually be a child that could wind up in his House due to abuse, shook the Potions Master.

He found it hard to breathe and moved away from the cupboard as memories of his own, abusive childhood, slipped from his carefully constructed walls, and assaulted his thoughts. He felt the couch against the back of his knees and he dropped, sitting, upon it and lowered his head to his knees.

He felt foolish for reacting in this manner, but the truth was, the scared little boy that often had to hide from his father's drunken tirades, or disappear into Hogwarts dungeons in order to evade the Gryffindor Marauders, was, for the moment, fully present. It was also that little boy's fear that settled the grown up Snape. As he raised his head and narrowed his gaze down the hallway towards the cupboard, he was now angry.

Angry at himself. Angry at Dumbledore. Angry at Minerva, who seemed to know something, but never had done a thing! And he was angry with the woman known as Petunia Evans Dursley. The young girl he remembered who had taunted her sister often to the point of tears. How could he have not once wondered about Lily's

child? Had Dumbledore, or anyone for that matter who once counted Lily and James Potter as friends ever checked up on the boy?

Snape strode to the cupboard, unlocked it, and hastily slammed the small door open.

All that was the "greasy git", the teacher that despised Gryffindors, the man who had been thoroughly prepared to make the son of James Potter "toe the line" and pay for his father's youthful injustices, vanished. As Snape looked down upon the curled up, sleeping, figure of a child, Lily's son, who looked so small that he couldn't have been eleven, he felt a hardness surrounding his heart melt. His world flipped over and his mind scrambled to reconstruct what he had thought Harry Potter might be, to coincide with what he saw.

Kneeling down upon one knee, Snape stretched out his hand and touched the boy's cheek. He could feel the crusty residue of tears upon the soft, cheek, and then he saw the bruise, and drops of blood upon the blanket, mattress, and the dingy shirt the child wore. Why hasn't he woken? Snape wondered as he followed the tiny drops of dried blood to bruised fingers, their ends nastily scraped, perhaps by the door's hinge.

"Lily," Snape whispered as his world finally settled and accepted that James Potter's son was hurting and truly did need someone. Even if that someone was a "greasy git" who had hated the bullying boy that had stolen Lily from him.

A wave of his wand kept the small boy safely asleep so that Snape was able to lean in and gather the boy to his chest. The child did smell horribly, mostly from the rags he wore, and the dirty mattress he slept upon. In his sleep, Harry mewled a mumbled protest that begged his Uncle to "stop". Scowling down at the filthy mattress and tattered remains of a baby blanket, Snape could see something of interest within the cramped cupboard. Taking Harry into the living room, he placed the small boy upon the sofa and returned to the cupboard.

Harry had made the most of his little cupboard home by decorating the walls with patches of paper that he'd drawn upon and coloured. They were fantasies and dreams of a castle, a giant, youngsters flying on brooms, and an old man with a long beard watching over it all. The most amazing drawing was one that Harry had done of

himself. He stood beside a tall man who was black from head to toe. The only color had been in the sallow cheeks, the big nose, and the long-fingered hand that held securely onto Harry's hand. The figure, clearly it was Snape, had his wand in his other hand and had it pointed at another figure. This second, adult figure was very snake-like, and frightening with red eyes. "The Dark Lord," Snape whispered softly. Voldemort was even taller than the drawn Snape, but he was wreathed in a green glow that was contorting his body.

Once again Snape felt his world tipping precariously. He took several deep breaths through his nose, and then, when he was sure he wasn't going to faint anymore, he reached in and gathered up all the artwork. The drawing of Harry, himself, and Voldemort, Snape shrank and then tucked into a hidden pocket in his cloak. The other drawings he gently folded, and tucked them into another pocket.

Snape shut the cupboard door and then walked over to his young charge. In his sleep, Harry cried out, pleading for someone to help him.

Gathering the small boy up and close to his chest, Snape pressed his cheek to the forehead just where the scar was and whispered, so Harry could hear him in his dreams, "I'm sorry I wasn't here earlier, Harry, but I'm here now. Hush child. I'll keep you safe."

Harry's small body relaxed and Snape, with a grim, but determined expression upon his face, Disapparated from #4 Privet Drive. Harry Potter, if he had anything to say about it, would never return.

A/N: Chapter revised to correct minor timeline mistakes and make it clearer on 4-14-10.

To be continued

I had intended this to be a one-shot, but after some thinking, some outlining, I have decided to expand upon this story.

I currently have 7 chapters that I need to proof.

The story will be, of course, AU. Fans of a good Malfoy family will be happy to know that they will figure prominently. Beware - much Albus bashing (though tame - I do love that old wizard!). Minerva McGonagall is going to get caught up in some of that, too. Gryffindor bashing as well.

There will be angst, mild references to child abuse (from the Dursleys), Slytherins, Death Eaters, and (Merlin forbid) Moldy Voldy, and a slightly different sort of Trio.

I have chosen to concentrate on Harry's more Slytherin traits as I am rather (ahem) more familiar with that side of things.

This will follow the first year at Hogwarts with some events we're all familiar with.

And now, a teaser:

Snape sat on one of the more comfortable visitors chairs in the Infirmary. In the bed nearby, Harry slept, a bit fitfully, but he didn't wake to any bad dreams. The potions in him and his day had no doubt exhausted him.

In his hand he had unfolded the curious drawing that he'd found in Harry's cupboard. Snape had to take a breath to calm himself as he thought of those blasted Muggles. He intended to visit them, later.

The drawing had a fair representation of Hogwarts in the background. It had a few extra towers and a wooden bridge that extended between towers that didn't exist, but anyone familiar with the old castle would know it at once. Flying around its towers were children on brooms, although none of them really had any faces since they were too small. Standing in front of a thatched hut that was surrounded by what some Muggles might think were pumpkins that were too big was Hagrid's hut. In front of this, in garish green

and yellow robes and a tall, conical hat was a wizard with a long beard, dancing.

Snape took a moment to scowl at the comic representation of Dumbledore. The facade of the doddering, old man was one that the Headmaster wielded to perfection. However, anyone who had ever been at the end of either his temper, his wand, or his power knew how false that was.

"Should have been a Slytherin, you old fox," hissed Snape. He instantly quieted as a small whimper was emitted from the sleeping boy. Automatically, he leaned over and rested his hand upon the boy's back. Harry let out a sigh of contentment and drifted deeper into sleep.

Dominating the drawing was a very strong character all in black. Harry had taken great care with his black crayon to shape the black of the robes so that they billowed, rather majestically behind the figure and started to curl around the smaller figure with glasses and messy black hair.

Snape touched his nose, and couldn't stop the soft snort of amusement that escaped. All of his features, his thin mouth, his very dark eyes (which the boy had used Sienna Brown to colour them instead of black), his defined cheeks, trademark scowl, and his large, bent nose had been more detailed than he had at first seen. Rarely did anyone realise that as dark as his eyes were, they really were not black. They were the deep brown he'd inherited from his mother.

The figure of Snape had a black clad arm draped protectively over the figure Harry's shoulder. The small fingers of Harry were clutching a portion of the voluminous robes.

The Snape figure's other arm stretched out holding his wand. Vicious crackles of green light, drawn as jagged lightning bolts, shot forth from the end of the wand to envelope a very eerie representation of the Dark Lord with snake white skin and inhuman, maroon eyes.

Snape shuddered. The Voldemort he'd known had been a charismatic man nearing his 50s. His hair had been brown, but long, nearly to his elbows, and Snape recalled how his women followers had been drawn to the Dark Lord. Bellatrix Lestrange had been the

worst in her fawning over the Dark Wizard. To Snape, Voldemort had always thrived under the mad woman's sycophantic behavior.

Harry's portrait was like a Dorian's Gray hidden portrait of the soul that was the evil of Voldemort. It was... accurate.

Folding the drawing, he tucked it carefully back into his pocket. The paper was old, and fragile, and Snape had an odd feeling that the drawing had been a treasured one of the small boy's for a few years.

"How did you know about us?" he softly spoke towards the sleeping child. "How did you know about me?" Snape's almost shy question was so softly whispered, he wasn't sure he had spoken aloud.

In answer, a breeze wafted into the infirmary. It wasn't cold, but warm, like a gentle breath. It briefly touched Snape's cheek, ruffled Harry's blankets, and was gone as quickly as it had arrived leaving only a gentle scent of sandalwood and citrus behind.

"Lily," whispered Snape.

He wanted to look around for his friend, but resisted doing so. He knew he would not see her. Lily was long gone. Only her son, small and vulnerable, remained.

The first chapter of the continuation will replace this in a week.

Thank you, all, for your lovely reviews and encouragement. :)

Sept. 1, 1991 - A few hours after the Sorting Feast

Snape sat on one of the more comfortable visitors chairs in the Infirmary. In the bed nearby, Harry slept, a bit fitfully, but he didn't wake to any bad dreams. The potions in him and his day had no doubt exhausted him.

In his hand he had unfolded the curious drawing that he'd found in Harry's cupboard. Snape had to take a breath to calm himself as he thought of those blasted Muggles. He intended to visit them, later.

The drawing had a fair representation of Hogwarts in the background. It had a few extra towers and a wooden bridge that extended between towers that didn't exist, but anyone familiar with the old castle would know it at once. Flying around its towers were children on brooms, although none of them really had any faces since they were too small. Standing in front of a thatched hut that was surrounded by what some Muggles might think were pumpkins that were too big was Hagrid's hut. In front of this, in garish green and yellow robes and a tall, conical hat was a wizard with a long beard, dancing.

Snape took a moment to scowl at the comic representation of Dumbledore. The facade of the doddering, old man was one that the Headmaster wielded to perfection. However, anyone who had ever been at the end of either his temper, his wand, or his power knew how false that was.

"Should have been a Slytherin, you old fox," hissed Snape. He instantly quieted as a small whimper emitted from the sleeping boy. Automatically, he leaned over and rested his hand upon the boy's back. Harry let out a sigh of contentment and drifted deeper into sleep.

Dominating the drawing was a very strong character all in black. Harry had taken great care with his black crayon to shape the black of the robes so that they billowed, rather majestically behind the figure and started to curl around the smaller figure with glasses and messy black hair.

Snape touched his nose, and couldn't stop the soft snort of amusement that escaped. All of his features, his thin mouth, his very dark eyes (which the boy had used Sienna Brown to colour them

instead of black), his defined cheeks, trademark scowl, and his large, bent nose had been more detailed than he had at first seen. Rarely did anyone realise that as dark as his eyes were, they really were not black. They were the deep brown he'd inherited from his mother.

The figure of Snape had a black clad arm draped protectively over the figure Harry's shoulder. The small fingers of Harry were clutching a portion of the voluminous robes.

The Snape figure's other arm stretched out holding his wand. Vicious crackles of green light, drawn as jagged lightning bolts, shot forth from the end of the wand to envelope a very eerie representation of the Dark Lord with snake white skin and inhuman, maroon eyes.

Snape shuddered. The Voldemort he'd known had been a charismatic man nearing his 50s. His hair had been brown, but long, nearly to his elbows, and Snape recalled how his women followers had been drawn to the Dark Lord. Bellatrix Lestrange had been the worst in her fawning over the Dark Wizard. To Snape, Voldemort had always thrived under the mad woman's sycophantic behavior.

Harry's portrait was like a Dorian Gray's hidden portrait of the soul that was the evil of Voldemort. It was... accurate.

Folding the drawing, he tucked it carefully back into his pocket. The paper was old, and fragile, and Snape had an odd feeling that the drawing had been a treasured one of the small boy's for a few years.

"How did you know about us?" he softly spoke towards the sleeping child. "How did you know about me?" Snape's almost shy question was so softly whispered, he wasn't sure he had spoken aloud.

In answer, a breeze wafted into the infirmary. It wasn't cold, but warm, like a gentle breath. It briefly touched Snape's cheek, ruffled Harry's blankets, and was gone as quickly as it had arrived leaving only a gentle scent of sandalwood and citrus behind.

"Lily," whispered Snape.

He wanted to look around for his friend, but resisted doing so. He knew he would not see her. Lily was long gone. Only her son, small and vulnerable, remained.



Snape had very little sleep after he'd left the Infirmary. Three of his new Snakes had wakened in the night, homesick and in tears. He had not been surprised that one of the three was young Draco Malfoy.

He had plied each of the three youngsters with hot chocolate that had been laced with a Calming Potion and then instructed the newly appointed prefects to watch over the firsties as he was in need of sleep himself. As it was, he'd only managed three hours of sleep.

Since Snape had a busy morning ahead of him he woke his Snakes early and gave them his usual beginning of term speech that was normally given at the end of the Sorting Feast. He briefed the firsties on his rules for Slytherin, and also reminded his older students of those rules. He then had the prefects usher the House to the Great Hall and to breakfast.

Snape himself had a quick bite of some fruit and two strong cups of coffee before he rose from the staff table to hand out schedules to his Snakes.

Sept. 2, 1991

Up in the Infirmary, Harry woke at seven, slightly disoriented. He had started to get out of bed, to go and fix breakfast for the Dursleys, when he realised he wasn't at #4 Privet Drive.

"Good morning, Mr. Potter," came a cheery voice.

Harry turned to see the brown-haired woman in starched blue and whites that he sort of half-remembered from blurry pained visions. He dropped his eyes quickly. It was never a good thing to meet a person's eyes. Uncle Vernon had taught him the folly of that.

Poppy took out her wand and waved it over the small boy. "You've responded well to your potions, but I want you to stay here for one more day. Do you need the facilities?" she asked solicitously.

Harry jumped off the bed and followed the woman obediently. She showed him a door and he pushed through it. Just minutes later he was back, standing at the woman's side.

"Did you wash your hands?" she asked.

"Yes'm," he muttered.

"Did you wash you face?" she asked once more.

"Yes'm, I did."

"Very good, then. You can have breakfast, and then I think you should have a bath."

This time he didn't follow. He stood in place by the loo with his eyes wide in surprise. "But, I haven't done any chores, yet," he protested.

"Children don't earn breakfast, Harry. It's a requirement. Now, come back to your bed and I'll bring you something nice to eat."

There was a small bounce in Harry's step as he returned to his bed and sat on the edge of it. Was he really going to get to eat before doing any chores? He really hoped so.

Harry's hopes were blessedly realised as the nurse looking woman returned with a tray that was floating beside her.

"Ma'am?" he whispered. Then he looked up, although he was peering at her cautiously through his fringe. "Who are you?"

"I'm the Healer here at Hogwarts. My name is Madame Poppy Pomfrey."

As soon as she left, Harry smiled to himself as he picked up a piece of bacon. Despite his relatives, he'd made it to Hogwarts!

Harry only ate half the breakfast, but Madame Pomfrey seemed satisfied with what he did eat. At her orders, he trotted off to the loo to take his bath.

It was pure heaven as he played with the many faucets that spilled forth warm water at just the perfect temperature. There were bubbles of all colours, too. Before he knew it, he was forgetting his aunt and how she always used to make him hurry his cold showers. He ducked beneath the water pretending he was a fish, and then he jumped up, spraying water from his mouth. He discovered that he

could splash all he wanted and none of the water spilled over the sides and onto the floor. For a moment he thrashed wildly, letting loose a few giggles, until Madame Pomfrey knocked on the door.

"I'm sorry! I'll hurry!" he called, suddenly subdued.

"No need, Mr. Potter. I just wanted to make sure you were all right. Take your time," she replied through the wooden door.

"Really?" he called back in disbelief.

"Really, Mr. Potter."

Harry wasn't sure, but he thought he heard a bit of laughter. He forgot it in seconds though as he began to play submarine captain.

Almost two hours later a very squeaky clean Harry emerged from the loo in fresh pyjamas, a dressing gown, and fluffy slippers. He was met by Madame Pomfrey who did smirk as she examined his pruny fingers. She gave him a potion, and a book to read, and settled him onto his bed.

Poppy hadn't expected Harry to let himself go in the tub and have fun. It was pleasant to hear his laughter as the water splashed about harmlessly. Normally she wouldn't stand for such nonsense in her Infirmary but she doubted that Harry ever had much time for such silliness. That, and since she had no other patients, as yet, she might as well let him indulge.

At lunch time she found Harry sitting cross-legged on his bed as he peered at the book she'd given him. It was a first year Charms textbook and she'd rather thought it might actually put him to sleep. It surprised her to find him studiously reading it.

Harry looked up, smiling widely, and comfortably, for the first time since Snape had brought him to Hogwarts. "This book is really interesting!"

"I thought you might enjoy Charms. It was a favourite subject of your mother's."

Harry's mouth dropped open. "My mother? You knew her?" He asked, the textbook all but forgotten.

Madame Pomfrey seated herself and smoothed her apron with the palms of her hands. "I did. Your father, too."

"What were they like?" asked Harry as he settled against his pillows as though he were preparing himself for a bedtime story.

"Well, James first, but only because he seemed to come into my Infirmary once a week. He was a very boisterous sort, very popular, and most especially popular with all the girls. He was a bit of a derring-do, too, and I suppose that was one reason he was in Gryffindor."

"Hagrid said he was really brave," Harry echoed some of the compliments the half-Giant had made about James Potter.

For a brief second, Madame Pomfrey's lips thinned, but then she smiled, dismissing her thoughts. "He was a brave man, Mr. Potter. He fought very hard for the Light."

For a moment Harry stared down at his blanket and picked at the satin ribbon that hemmed the edge. "My mum was really brave, too. Hagrid said it was my mum's sacrifice that saved my life." Without realising he was doing it, his hand raised and he rubbed at the lightning bolt scar.

"You were the world to your mother, Mr. Potter. A mother's love is not only strong, but sacred magic. It is no surprise to me that you survived the Killing Curse." She smiled and chuckled softly. "Witches understand such magic more than wizards do."

Harry was suddenly feeling infinitely sad. As much as he wanted to know more about his parents, he didn't want to know how brave they'd been in dying for him. It might have been brave, noble even, but Harry only felt cheated and their loss was all that much harder to bear when he'd spent the last ten years in a cupboard wishing to be with them.

Harry changed the subject by picking up the textbook. "Let me read you this, Madame Pomphrey..."

"Pomfrey, Mr. Potter."

He blushed at having mis-pronounced her name. "Sorry. Can I read you this?" The Healer nodded and Harry set his nose, almost to the page, and began to read the paragraph on the Wingardium Leviosa Spell smoothly.

"Well done, Mr. Potter!" she praised and Harry let out a small breath he was holding. He put down the book, closed it, and sniffed the soup. She made a mental note to set up an appointment with an Oculist.

"Did your aunt and uncle encourage you to read?" she asked.

The smile that had radiated upon Harry's face was abruptly gone. He dipped his head and hid behind his fringe as he pushed away the tray of food.

"Oh, do please eat, Mr. Potter. You're quite thin and we'd really like you to put on some weight." Poppy sighed in slight frustration. She really ought not to have mentioned the aunt and uncle.

"Where's the Dark Man?" Harry asked mournfully. He paid no attention to the food.

"Dark Man?" Poppy frowned.

"He rescued me... I think. I don't know if I was dreamin' or not. Was I? Is the Dark Man real?" Harry curled his fists into the hem of his pyjama shirt.

"Ah! You must mean Professor Snape! He's the one that rescued you," Poppy said with a smile.

"So, the Dark Man's real?" Harry asked hopefully.

"Professor Snape is real, Mr. Potter. I'm sure he'll come and visit when his classes are finished. He's contacted me twice, so far, to see how you were doing."

Harry's green eyes sparkled at that information. Poppy rose, and spoke slyly, "I think Professor Snape would be disappointed if he found out you'd not eaten that lovely lunch."

As she suspected, Harry didn't want to disappoint his rescuer. He picked up the spoon and began eating the vegetable soup.

At that moment three students arrived. One was a bushy-haired girl, the second was a very blonde headed boy with a pained scowl on his face, and the third was a rather vacant looking, overweight boy.

Madame Pomfrey surveyed the three first years. "And where have you three come from?" she asked as she walked over to the blonde that was supported by the other two. Blood on the back of his head stained his hair.

"Professor Snape sent us, Madame," replied the girl.

"Over there," Poppy indicated an empty bed next to Harry's. "Can you tell me what happened?"

"He fell," said the overweight boy simply. The blonde scowled at him darkly.

"Professor Snape was showing us pickled shrivelfigs and Vincent and Gregory were throwing one back and forth when they dropped it. Draco stepped on it, slipped, and hit his head," elaborated the girl.

"Thank you, Miss Granger."

"Know-it-all Mud...!" began Draco with a sneer.

"Finish that word, Mr. Malfoy and I'll wash your mouth out with soap as soon as I patch you up," warned Poppy.

"But she is a Mudblood," Gregory Goyle interjected stupidly.

With a flick of her wand, Goyle's mouth foamed with soap. He spluttered and ran to the sink in the loo.

Harry was snickering until the girl, Hermione Granger, glared at him. "That's not funny!"

Harry blanched and hid behind his book. Hermione saw the book and her eyes lit up. "That's out first year Charms textbook!" She moved over towards Harry. "I've read the whole thing. Have you?"

Harry's finger trailed over the spine. He shook his head, not looking up.

"It's really a fascinating subject. Although, Potions are too, but Professor Snape is just a bit..." she hesitated, glancing at Draco who glared warningly at her. "Well, he's just strict, is all. What House are you in?"

"None," replied Harry. He was feeling a bit overwhelmed by this girl who seemed to talk a mile a minute.

Hermione blinked, but before she could say anything, Draco interrupted, "I've seen you before! In Madame Malkin's shop. Who are you?"

"Quiet," Poppy ordered. "Miss Granger, you need to get to your next class, but check on Mr. Goyle and if he's all right, take him with you."

"Yes, Madame." Hermione went to obey, and soon she was tugging Goyle out of the Infirmary.

"You're going to have a bit of a bump, Mr. Malfoy. How does it feel, now?" asked the Healer.

"Better." Gingerly he touched the bump that was forming. "Ow!"

"I told you so. Lie down. You're going to be here for the rest of the day." Poppy turned away from Draco. "Mr. Potter, eat your lunch before it gets cold."

"Yes, ma'am," he dutifully replied. He started to dip his spoon into his bowl of soup when Draco interrupted him.

"You're Harry Potter?" he asked. "Can I see the scar?"

Harry didn't quite like the gleam in the young boy's grey eyes, but he shrugged and lifted the fringe off his forehead so Draco could see the lightning bolt scar.

Draco slipped off his bed to get a better look. "That's wicked!" He sat on the edge of Harry's bed. "Is it true you got it killing You-Know-Who?"

"Madame Pomfrey said it was my mother that saved me." Again Harry shrugged, and pushed his tray of food away. "I kind of think it's silly to think a baby killed a full grown wizard."

"Yeah," agreed Draco with a nod. "I've always thought so, too. I bet your mother had some special magic. Mothers always have magic more powerful than fathers do when it comes to their kids." Draco held out his hand. "Draco Malfoy!"

Harry shyly took his hand, then grinned. "Harry Potter."

By the time Snape had finished with his last class of the day he was ready to visit Harry in the Infirmary to see how he was doing. As he emerged from the dungeons, he was walking across the Entrance Hall when a tall, stately figure pushed through the main door.

"Lucius," Snape greeted coolly and with a polite nod.

Lucius inclined his head and smiled charmingly. "Severus. I was told by Madame Pomfrey that my son suffered an injury in your class today."

Snape walked beside the Malfoy patriarch. "Mr. Goyle and Mr. Crabbe thought it might be amusing to toss about a pickled shrivelfig," he elaborated. "Draco, unfortunately, slipped upon it when it was dropped to the floor and hit the back of his head."

Malfoy's expression darkened. "I warned Draco about those two oafs. He chose them as his bodyguards, didn't he?"

"So it appears. They were practically glued to Draco at breakfast and in class. Draco seems to have nothing but contempt for them, though," observed Snape.

"As I have for their imbecilic fathers." Lucius shook his head. "Draco cannot possibly have a future if those two tag along. Are there any other prospects in his year?"

"Blaise Zabini would be one to cultivate," replied Snape. "I understand you have re-opened negotiations with Zabini's Import business?" Lucius gave a curt nod in reply. "Then it would be advantageous if those two became friends."



Lucius nodded in consideration. "Anyone else? Or, anyone else that would be a problem?"

"Are you truly wishing to sever ties with Vadim Parkinson?" asked Snape shrewdly.

"He's been bargaining for my Collection. I believe Parkinson is one of those in Secret, Severus."

Snape nodded. "He bears watching, then. Miss Parkinson had her eye close upon Draco at breakfast this morning and would have sat beside him in class were it not for the two bookends. I suggest that Draco remain polite, but do nothing to encourage her flirtation."

The two men quieted as they entered the Infirmary. They both froze as they saw Harry Potter seated on Draco Malfoy's bed as they were both deeply engrossed in a game of wizarding chess.

"You have to be discerning when listening to your men if the chess set doesn't belong to you," instructed Draco. "Now, this set actually belongs to Madame Pomfrey, so the pieces are more neutral and a bit more trustworthy with their advice."

"Still, it's better not to rely on them completely, right?" asked Harry.

"Yeah." He moved a bishop, then looked up at Harry. "Are you seeing ahead, yet?"

Harry frowned studiously down at the game board. "Trying, but I'm not doing so well. What do you see?"

Draco hmm'd a moment, then replied, "See, since you're a novice, I would expect you to go for the more obvious move. See here? You'd probably block my bishop so he can't get to your king. However, the more strategic move is here with the queen."

"You'd take her!" exclaimed Harry.

"Yeah, but then, look here." Very carefully Draco indicated the next five moves that would prove a win for Harry. He smiled.

"Wow!" Harry grinned.

Lucius chose that moment to step further in and up to his son's bed. "Well, you don't appear half as bad as Madame Pomfrey made it sound, Draco."

"Father!" Draco beamed and although he started to jump up from his bed to embrace his father, he resisted the temptation to get overly emotional. His father gave him an approving nod. "Father, this is... this is my friend, Harry Potter! Harry, this is my father."

Lucius' smile froze for a brief moment, before a touch of warmth touched it. Harry looked up, very open at first, but then he saw a calculating look in the older Malfoy's eye that made him nervous. He cast his eyes downward and mumbled a greeting.

To Harry's horror, the man was raising his cane and he was about to back away when Snape intervened smoothly. "Speak up, Mr. Potter. It is never polite to mumble." Snape lightly touched the small boy's shoulder in assurance.

"Sorry," he said a bit more bravely. "It's nice to meet you, Mr. Malfoy."

Lucius graciously inclined his head to the boy. "And you as well, Mr. Potter. So, you and Draco have become friends?"

"Yeah, I mean, I guess so, sir. We were just both in here and bored and then Madame Pomfrey gave us the chessboard, and Draco's been teaching me." Harry let out a nervous breath and leaned a bit more towards Snape.

"Ah. And what House are you in, Mr. Potter?" asked Lucius very slyly.

Harry glanced up at Snape who replied, "Mr. Potter had an accident that kept him from meeting the Hogwarts Express so he has not, yet, been sorted."

Lucius smiled again, but this time he looked to Harry like someone who'd just been given something he wanted. Smoothly he said to Harry, "I'm sure that whatever House the Hat Sorts you into will suit you well, Mr. Potter." Lucius then looked up at Snape. "If you don't mind, I would like to speak to my son before I return home, Severus."

Snape nodded and nudged Harry back to his own bed. Lucius, with a sharp wave of his wand, cast a Muffliato Spell so that he and Draco could talk without being overheard.

"How is your head, Draco?" asked his father. Lucius gently grasped his son's chin so that he could lower his head for him to examine the injury.

"It's feeling better, but I have a pretty big bump, father," replied Draco.

"I can see it." Lucius removed one glove from one hand and very delicately touched the bump that looked worse than it was. Draco let out a small hiss. "It still hurts?" Lucius asked with a touch of concern.

Draco nodded slowly. "It just mostly stings."

"I'm certain after a good night's sleep it should all be well." For a brief moment, Lucius touched his son's cheek with his fingertips. Draco smiled softly. Although Lucius and Narcissa had been affectionate parents when he was smaller, Lucius' affections had become more reserved once Draco received his Hogwarts letter. He desperately missed curling up beside his father in the study where Lucius would read to him in front of the wide fireplace.

Lucius seated himself on the edge of the bed. "I am not pleased in hearing of your association with Crabbe and Goyle, Draco. They are hardly your intellectual equals and they will be more of a hindrance to your future than an asset."

Draco dared to lean against his father's arm and was surprised when the older man draped it gently across his shoulders. "Some of the big boys said they'd beat me up, father."

Lucius could hear the fear in his son's voice, and although he knew he ought to be the aloof man his father had taught him to be, Lucius couldn't ignore his child's need for him. He pulled the boy closer to his side. The 'big boys' Lucius knew could only be those children of Death Eaters that had not been as clever as he to escape Azkaban, or in some cases, the Dementor's Kiss.

"Work on the spells I showed you and go to Severus if you need help, Draco," Lucius instructed.

"I have been, but Professor Snape can't watch me all the time, father."

Smartly he patted Draco's shoulder and withdrew his arm as he put his glove back on. "No, he cannot. I suggest that you cultivate a friendship with Blaise Zabini and I believe that Harry Potter would be a good ally for you to have. Especially if he follows his parents into Gryffindor."

Draco looked appalled. "But I can't be friends with him if he's a Gryffindor!"

Lucius frowned darkly down at his son. "If the Malfoy name is to completely recover from your grandfather's foolish mistakes, then we cannot afford to be so choosy in our associations, son. I expect you to take the lessons I taught you, to consult Severus when needed, and to make those... friendships... that will make our Name strong once again." He touched the silver serpent head of his cane to Draco's chin. "Am I understood?"

Draco nodded, but his expression was of misery. Lucius gently cupped his chin, making his son meet his eyes. "This is not going to be easy, Dragon. Not only are you facing the inherent prejudice that Slytherin faces, but you are also facing the mistakes of your grandfather and..." his voice lowered, "and those of your father."

Draco glanced up into his father's eyes and then slipped his hand into Lucius' now gloved hand. He squeezed. "I can always write to you, too, can't I, father?"

Lucius stood and gently extricated his hand from his son's grip. It felt like it had only been yesterday that he'd held his child on his lap, comforted him during a thunderstorm, or tended to his scrapes and bruises when he played too hard. Draco was growing so fast, but still he needed his father. Lucius brushed the boy's hair off his forehead and then touched his fingertips one last time to the boy's cheek.

"You may write to me everyday if you wish, Dragon. I expect you, though, to heed my advice." He leaned down and whispered, "Be rid of Crabbe and Goyle."

"Yes, father," Draco spoke softly. Just as Lucius turned to end the Silencing Spell, Draco stopped him. "I... I love you, father."

Lucius ended the spell, smiled at his son, and touched his cheek once more before turning away. Draco smiled outwardly and inwardly as well. The change in his father, in the way he had begun treating him more as an adult had been hard for Draco to take. Knowing that his father still cared, still loved him, made it all easier. He also breathed a small sigh of relief in knowing he could rid himself of the two buffoon bookends, Crabbe and Goyle.

Lucius stopped by Harry's bed. Harry looked up at the imposing man. "Thank you for your kindness to my son, Mr. Potter. I look forward to hearing what House you've been sorted in."

"Me too, sir!" Harry smiled shyly.

For the briefest of seconds, Lucius gave the child a genuine smile of warmth before turning his attention to Snape. "Severus, I think we need to talk. Would you come by the Manor for tea this Saturday?"

Snape eyed him shrewdly, but then nodded. "I will owl you with a time that is convenient, Lucius."

"Very good, Severus." Lucius bowed slightly and then swept out.

As Lucius raised the Silencing Spell that kept he and Harry from hearing the elder Malfoy converse with his son, Snape sat down in a visitors chair beside Harry. Harry was watching the two Malfoys with hooded curiosity.

Snape studied the boy as he sat and watched through his fringe. His body was turned away, but there was a subtle sneakiness to him that Snape knew he'd never have gotten from his father, James. James Potter had been brash, loud, always doing his best to be noticed by everyone. The Potions Master found it curious that so far, in this child who did his best to be unobtrusive, had yet to show anything, other than his physical appearance, that made Snape think of James Potter.

"I can't hear them," Harry observed after a few minutes as he surreptitiously moved pieces on the chessboard.

Snape removed the chessboard from Harry by levitating it back to a shelf that held fiction books, colouring books, and a few other quiet games. For a brief moment Harry's lips thinned in irritation before the expression was replaced by one of quiescent obedience.

"Lucius cast a spell that keeps their conversation private," explained Snape.

"It's rude," muttered Harry as he slipped back under his blankets but remained sitting up.

Snape's eyebrow rose. "Is it? What business is it of yours what they are discussing?"

Harry lowered his head, regretting having spoken. He had learned that he needed to keep his eyes and ears always aware of his surroundings, and that especially meant conversations. There were many times when the Dursleys spoke to each other, thinking that Harry wasn't listening, when he learned what to expect. He was able to learn, not just from Uncle Vernon's temper whether or not he had a good day at work. A bad day meant that Uncle Vernon would drink later and if Harry wasn't good about staying out from under the large man's feet, he'd be his uncle's tension relief.

"Mr. Potter," the tone, firm and unyielding, had Harry snap his head up and locking his gaze onto the older wizard's. "I will tell you this now, and expect you to remember it. I do not ask questions just to hear my own voice. If I ask you something, I expect an answer, even if you do not know the answer. Am I understood?"

Harry nodded, then spoke quickly, "Yes, sir."

"Now tell me, what does it matter to you what they may be discussing?" Snape asked firmly.

Looking through his long, messy fringe Harry watched the touches of affection between Draco and his father. He felt a tight sting of jealousy and turned sharply away.

"Mr. Potter," Snape's voice took on a warning edge. He still wanted a verbal answer.

Harry shrugged. "Habit," he muttered.

Snape nodded, understanding much more than the small boy realised. He had learned that it was easier to hide from his drunken father if he kept his ears open. It was one of those habits that had carried on into adulthood. Snape did not care for eavesdroppers, but as a Death Eater and spy, eavesdropping, or the reading of lips, and other talents, had kept him alive.

"Would you care to tell me what you've been up to today?" Snape asked the boy.

Harry relaxed visibly and looked up. "I did some reading of those books in the corner, but then Madame Pomfrey had a few textbooks that I looked at. They've got a lot of big words and strange words that don't even sound like English." He smiled and lifted the first years Charms textbook. "I learned about the Wingardum Leverosa Spell."

Snape winced at the bad pronunciation. He was glad it was Flitwick teaching Charms and not him.

"I looked at the Potions textbook, too. Madame Pomfrey said you teach that. It looks a little like my Chemistry class. Is it?" Harry asked.

"Somewhat," Snape replied vaguely. "Was Chemistry a class you enjoyed?"

"Sort of. I think I would have liked it better if Dudley hadn't been my lab partner." Harry dropped his head and curled his fists into the covers of his bed.

Snape sighed quietly. It was not going to be easy for the boy to talk about the abuse at the hands of his relatives if he kept shutting down so quickly.

Just then, Lucius ended his discussion with his son. The Silencing Spell was ended, as well, and Lucius took a moment to say farewell

to Harry. The smile he gave the boy made Snape wary. There was genuine warmth in it; not something anyone saw everyday.

Snape knew that it had taken every scrap of Malfoy ingenuity to escape a life sentence in Azkaban. Abraxas Malfoy had been a harsh parent to Lucius and Snape had healed the teenager of more cuts and bruises than even himself of the injuries his father inflicted upon him. Then again, Snape's father had been a Muggle and so, unlike Abraxas, he did not have access to magic, or the Unforgivables.

Yes, Lucius was often punished with a Crucio. The Crucio Relief Potion Snape had developed had been for his older friend. Snape, himself, had not been dealt any punishment by the Cruciatus Curse. Lucius was, understandably, completely terrified of his father.

When Draco had been born was the only time Lucius had ever wept. He was thankful for his child, but he was also entirely unsure that he could be a father, a normal father. Especially since Abraxas had promised the newborn grandson to Voldemort.

That was when Lucius made the decision to get out from under the hard hand of the Dark Lord. It was impossible, though, but Snape had begun to teach Lucius Occlumency to protect his thoughts from Voldemort.

It was Dumbledore, of all wizards, who suggested that Lucius make the claim that he had been under the Imperius Curse first by his father (at least that was a half-truth) and then by various Death Eaters including the Dark Lord. Dumbledore had sworn before the Wizengamot that Lucius had indeed been under the Imperius by claiming that he had Legilimensed the young wizard and had discovered evidence of Mental Tampering.

Lucius, like Snape, lived with the constant fear that the Dark Lord would return, and they would have no choice but to return to his side. Snape, of course, would resume spying for Dumbledore, if it was needed. Lucius had made a similar offer to Dumbledore, but the Headmaster had refused the offer, since he was, he had said, considering Lucius' family.

Since the Dark Lord's death, Lucius and Snape had rarely spoken to each other. Snape, content to remain a teacher along with its almost



anonymity, did not feel comfortable around Lucius who had become more social than his father ever was. Ever the consummate Slytherin, though, Lucius intelligence and charm kept him close to people like Minister Fudge, the Hogwarts Board of Governors, and any other contact that would continue to help him restore the honor to the Malfoy name. If he wasn't attending some social function, then he and Narcissa were hosting their own parties.

The invitation to tea at Malfoy Manor brought Snape's attention back to the present. It wasn't that he was surprised by the invitation. He had gone to tea many times before. It was that in recent years Lucius had not extended an invitation because he knew Snape hoarded his privacy like a dragon hoarded its gold. That, and both Snape and Lucius knew that Narcissa always felt that tea with Snape meant that she had tacit permission to play matchmaker.

As Snape accepted the invitation, it was only as Lucius was leaving the Infirmary that he recalled Narcissa's past matchmaking efforts. With a sigh, he pinched the bridge of his nose. He didn't dare to guess what witch she might have in mind for him this time.

Sept. 3, 1991 - Tuesday

Draco was released from the Infirmary the next day, but he came back during lunch and dinner to visit Harry. It was at dinner that Madame Pomfrey told Harry he would be released before breakfast the next day.

Draco had brought up a collection of Chocolate Frogs that he and Harry were sharing now. "You think you'll get Sorted tomorrow, Harry?"

"Yeah. Dumbledore came by right before you did and told me that as soon as Madame Pomfrey let me go, I'd be Sorted." Harry opened a box and caught the Chocolate Frog as it leapt free.

Draco glanced at his Wizard Card and was disappointed to find that it was Dumbledore. Again. He tossed it aside. "Do you have a preference on what House you'd like to go into?"

Harry shrugged. "I don't know. Hagrid was really putting Slytherin down a lot, but after meeting Professor Snape, and you, I'm thinking he might not be entirely right."

Draco hid the smug smile that threatened the corners of his mouth. "Well, it does have an unfortunate reputation, but Professor Snape is a really great Head of House. I think he pays more attention to his Snakes than any other Head does with their House."

"What's he like? I mean, as your Head?" asked Harry as he finished his chocolate frog and wiped his sleeve across his mouth.

"Well," said Draco thoughtfully. "He's strict. I mean, everyone knows he can be kind of a... hm... well, a git in Potions class, but he has to be. It can be really dangerous, you know, and in all the years he's been teaching, he's the only Potions Master that never had a kid get killed in class." Draco smirked at Harry's somewhat green expression. "Snape's pretty good to us Snakes, though. A lot of the other Houses, Gryffindor especially, are going to say that Snape favors us 'cause no one ever sees him giving his Snakes detentions or taking away points."

"So he let's you get away with stuff?" Harry asked incredulously.

"See? It looks like that, but Snape doesn't let anyone get away with anything. He doesn't punish us in public unless we've done something really stupid and wrong. Like yesterday in Potions? Pansy Parkinson, who's real jealous of the Mud... uhm... Granger? Well, she thought she'd be real smart and try to sabotage Granger's potion. Pansy not too smart, though, and she's terrible with Potions. She tossed some extra Applewhite into Granger's potion, but instead of a big bang, her potion just kind of fizzled. Granger got glared at, and she just apologised a lot. She didn't know what Pansy did."

"Did Snape know?" asked Harry with wide eyes.

"Oh yeah!" Draco snickered. "I think Snape's got like magic eyes in the back of his head or something. He knew! Later, in the Slytherin common room, Snape showed up and lectured Pansy in front of the entire House!" Draco giggled and Harry smiled.

"So, anyway, Snape was lecturing her on what could have happened if she'd selected the wrong ingredient to throw in Granger's cauldron. Then, when she was crying, Snape then made

her go stand in the corner and he stayed in the common room for an hour answering questions about homework."

"Isn't that kinda like what parents do?" asked Harry, colouring just a little at how stupid the question sounded.

"Well, he is kind of a parent, isn't he?" Draco replied. He then leaned forward and whispered, "Did you know that Snape really watches over us firsties?"

"Like how," Harry asked, equally as quiet as Draco.

Draco's cheeks pinkened before he replied, "Well, my first night here, I was sorta missing my parents, you know?"

Harry really didn't, but he understood the emotion that underscored his friend's words.

"Anyway, I couldn't get to sleep, so Snape gave me hot chocolate and talked to me 'til I felt better." Draco smiled, and although he blushed a bit deeper, he didn't seem to care about it.

"Wow," breathed Harry. "Do you know what any of the other Houses are like?"

"Well, there's Gryffindor and Professor MacGonagall's their Head. She's really stern and kinda prune-faced. She can be scary, I think. She's old, too. Father says that she was a real tough teacher and he thinks Snape learned some of his scowls from her." Draco giggled and Harry smiled.

"So, what are Gryffindors? From what I've been hearing, Gryffindors and Slytherins really don't like each other. Is that true?"

Draco nodded. "Yeah. Gryffindors are always trying to be heroic, which isn't bad, but they're real noisy about it. Like, 'we're the best' and so on. Snape says we Snakes have to stick together because it's usually the Gryffindors that are the bullies. They're always..." he frowned, trying to recall what his Head of House had said at the welcoming speech. "Oh yeah, Gryffindors need an enemy to vanquish, and if there isn't one, then they pick on Slytherins."

Harry frowned. "That sucks."

"Yeah, it does. And they have been kind of jerks, well, except for that Mud... I mean, that Granger girl."

"Hermione?"

"Yeah, her. There were some Gryffindor boys, I think sixth years, that were teasing Blaise, and Millicent, in the Entrance Hall. And, one of them was actually going to hex them with Tarantellegra when Granger stepped between them and she DID hex them both with some really icky, cool spell that made them sneeze for an hour!"

Both boys laughed at the visual.

"Oh yeah," blurted Draco, "and Snape saw her, too! Some of the older Slytherins say that Snape never gives points to Gryffindor, but he gave Granger 10 points for sticking up for Slytherins against her own House!"

"That's great! Hermione sounds pretty nice." Harry had opened his last chocolate frog and glanced at the wizarding card. It was Dumbledore. "What's that name you keep starting to call her."

Draco bowed his head. "Mudblood," he said quietly.

"That doesn't sound too nice," observed Harry. "What's it mean?"

"It isn't nice," agreed Draco. "It means anyone who isn't born to magical parents. Both Granger's parents are Muggles."

"My mother was Muggle," said Harry softly.

"Yeah, I know." Draco shrugged. "Snape specifically told all us Slytherins he doesn't want to hear that word used, but there are sixth and seventh year kids that use it all the time." He raised his head suddenly. "My father doesn't like it either and would really be mad if I was even thinking of saying it, but it's kinda hard not to when you hear it all the time."

Harry did know. His own aunt and uncle never used his name so when others used his name, it was strange. Sometimes, he even forgot to answer because he expected to hear himself referred to as 'freak'.

Harry decided to change the subject. "So what are Hufflepuff and Ravenclaw like?"

Draco smiled knowledgeably. He was really having fun answering all of Harry's questions. "Hufflepuff is where all the students that are real big on loyalty go. They're usually the nicest students and they're real easy to get along with, even if you're a Slytherin. Professor Sprout is their Head of House. She teaches Herbology and she's a little... uhm... motherly, but not too bad. I just hate herbology."

"That's plants and gardens, right?" asked Harry.

"Yeah. It's dirt," grimaced Draco.

"I used to plant my aunt's garden," Harry offered quietly. Working on his aunt's garden was never the punishment Aunt Petunia meant it to be. It allowed him to be outside, and away from his relatives for a few hours each day. The weather wasn't always pleasant, but it was far better than the darkness of his cupboard.

Draco glanced sideways at Harry. "You didn't like it, did you?"

Harry shrugged, not willing to provide anymore information than needed. "It wasn't bad."

"Our house elves do the gardening and all the work that's gross," Draco said a little imperiously.

Snape arrived just at that moment and Draco scrambled off Harry's bed. "Mr. Malfoy, if you leave now, you'll be in your common room before curfew strikes."

"Yes, sir!" Draco turned to Harry. "Good night, Harry, and good luck on your Sorting tomorrow." Draco then turned to Snape. "Good night, professor."

With a nod to the small boy, Draco grinned and then ran out of the Infirmary.

Harry looked up at Snape and smiled. "I see Draco's been keeping you entertained, Mr. Potter," he glanced down balefully at all the empty chocolate frog boxes. "And he's been influencing your diet as

well, I see." With a swish of his wand, the boxes were gone, but not the cards. Snape seated himself in the visitor's chair and gathered up the scattered wizarding cards. He began thumbing through them.

"Mostly Professor Dumbledore, but I got a Nicolas Flamel," said Harry showing him the card of the very old wizard who had his back turned at the moment.

Snape nodded in approval. "A rare one."

"That's what Draco said." Harry smiled and deposited the card on top of a small pile of other cards. It appeared that Harry had been introduced to one of a wizard boy's favorite pasttimes; that of collecting wizard cards.

"How have you been today, Mr. Potter?" asked Snape as he put aside the Dumbledore cards.

"Bored, actually," he replied. "Except when Draco came to visit. Oh! And Professor Dumbledore visited, too!"

Snape's eyes narrowed just a bit. "Did he?" It had bothered him that Dumbledore had shown no interest in what Snape had discovered about the Potter boy and his relatives. In fact, the Headmaster had been somewhat cavalier about the abuse.

Yesterday Snape was called to the Headmaster's office during his free period. Snape had hoped to visit Harry, but hurried up to Dumbledore's Tower office to see if the old wizard was ready to talk about what Snape had discovered about Harry and his relatives.

Snape was ushered into Dumbledore's office and promptly offered one of the old wizard's ubiquitous lemon drops. Snape just shook his head and seated himself in a chair on the other side of the Headmaster's desk.

"Have you read Poppy's report, yet, Headmaster?" asked Snape.

Dumbledore looked up from his tin of lemon drops. "Oh quite, yes I have. Distressing thing, wasn't it? However, Poppy says that Harry is recovering rather nicely and it should be another day or two when he can get Sorted and start his classes."

Snape frowned slightly. "I did mention, did I not, that the uncle burned everything with the exception of the boy's owl?" Snape knew he had told the old man on the night he'd brought Harry to Hogwarts. That had been a hurried report, but he did not think Dumbledore had forgotten any of it. The old wizard wasn't as dotty as he pretended to be.

"Yes, yes you did. Well, after he's Sorted then I'm sure Minerva, as his Head of House, will be able to take him to Diagon Alley."

Snape stiffened. "You're so sure he'll be Sorted into Gryffindor?"

Dumbledore's eyes twinkled as he smiled and Snape ground his teeth together in irritation. "With Lily and James as his parents? It would be unusual if he were Sorted elsewhere." Dumbledore's gaze narrowed in scrutiny as he peered over his half-moon spectacles at the Potions Master. "Are you thinking he might be Sorted into another House, Severus?"

"Lily would have made a good Slytherin." The moment he uttered that, Snape knew he had said the wrong thing.

"Perhaps, but the fact is Lily was in Gryffindor and it was Harry who defeated the Dark Lord. I do believe the boy's legacy is fixed, Severus."

If Snape were to pursue that assumption, he would wind up in an argument he would lose, and so he changed the subject. "Be that as it may, Headmaster, I am more concerned with the child's health and welfare. His injuries were unacceptable."

Dumbledore nodded sadly. "Very true, Severus. I suppose it was wrong of me to think that Petunia would look upon Harry as her beloved sister's child and not as an interloper. I am considering some precautions to take when Harry is not at Hogwarts over the summer."

"Will you find a new guardian for him?" asked Snape. A small tug at his heart didn't really wish to know the answer.

Dumbledore shook his head. "Oh no! Harry will be going back to his aunt and uncle."

Snape nearly fell from his chair in shock. "Are you mad, Albus? They nearly killed the boy! They burnt everything and then threw him into a cupboard after beating him! How can you even think of sending him back to them?"

Dumbledore held up a hand to calm the younger wizard. "I do not condone what the Dursleys did, Severus, but the fact remains that it is the Blood Magic of Harry's mother that is keeping him safe."

"From the Dark Lord's followers, yes, but they do nothing to keep the child safe from those Muggles! Headmaster, surely there must be..."

Dumbledore interrupted. "Severus, although I am pleased that you appear to be so attached to the boy, there is nothing to dissuade me. I do realise the folly of sending Harry into the arms of a family that does not love him, but there are several protection spells that I will cast upon him to keep them from hurting him."

Snape's lips thinned tightly. He knew that if there were a way to hurt Harry, even if they only could verbally, they would do so.

"My boy, I am certain Harry will continue to thrive here at Hogwarts. He will eat well, make friends, and we will all watch over him. You needn't worry about his summers."

Snape's scowl darkened, but he said nothing. He knew all too well what it would mean for Harry to return to those Muggles. After all, it had been no better for him.

The one time he had spoken to an adult had been the last time he had ever trusted them again. His own Head of House, Horace Slughorn, who had always appeared to be somewhat of a genial, caring sort of man, had listened to Snape's fears and then had betrayed him. The man had written to his parents. He hadn't known, of course. Not until he returned home.

The beating his father had given him that summer when he returned, reluctantly, had taken him all of the summer to recover from. Had it not been for Lily, who did her best to nurse his wounds and kept his secret, even from her parents, he was certain he would have died, of shame, if not from his wounds.



Snape rose stiffly from his chair. He couldn't listen to anymore of the Headmaster's sugary drivel. "If there is nothing else, Headmaster?"

"Not at all, my boy." Albus waved him away, and Snape strode out of the office.

He had made a promise to Lily, and to Harry. He meant to keep it, no matter what he had to do.

"Would you like to tell me what the Headmaster's visit was about?" Snape dearly hoped the old man hadn't been so callous as to tell Harry that he'd be returning to his relatives.

"Just came to say hello. He was telling me some about my father and his friends." Harry bowed his head and picked at the blanket over his legs.

Snape frowned. "What's wrong?"

Harry shrugged and Snape swore he heard a small snuffle. He leaned closer and touched the boy's chin so he would look up. "Did the Headmaster upset you, child?"

"Yeah, well no. I mean, I don't think he meant to and I didn't show that I was bugged because he just kinda kept on..."

Snape interrupted Harry and asked softly, "Harry, what did the Headmaster say?"

"That my dad would be so proud of me because I'm the hero that everyone's been waiting for and that even though my mum and dad died, I should be happy because they..." Harry paused, wanting to get the exact phrase that Dumbledore had spoken. He let out a sigh, "that I should be happy that they loved me so much, they..." he gulped, "...sacrificed themselves..." his voice dropped to a nearly, inaudible whisper. "For me." Harry shook his head. Tears that he couldn't stop came unbidden and he felt like crawling back into his cupboard to hide.

Harry hadn't been 'happy' when the Headmaster told him that. Didn't he understand that more than anything Harry just wanted his parents back? And he was mad, too. Mad at his parents for their 'sacrifice' and that made his stomach hurt.

Harry's head shot up and Snape pulled back. He did not expect the anger that glimmered from the boy's tear-filled eyes. "My parents were STUPID!" Harry shouted. "They got killed 'cause they wouldn't stop fighting Voldemort an' he got mad an' he killed 'em! They left me! Why should I be happy about that?"

The little boy scrambled from his bed and ran for the loo. He slammed the door shut behind himself. Snape followed Harry and was stymied by the fact that the upset child's accidental magic had, it appeared, locked a door that didn't have a lock.

Sept. 6, 1991 - Friday

Friday morning, Poppy had escorted Harry to the Great Hall. His eyes darted about worriedly until he saw Draco, who smiled guardedly at him, and then Hermione, who waved at him. Glancing up at the staff table, he breathed a sigh of relief when he saw Snape and the man simply nodded once to him.

"Here, Mr. Potter." Harry, who had paused about halfway the length of the Great Hall, looked toward the stern voice of Professor Minerva McGonagall. In her hand was something that looked like a dirty piece of old felt. Next to her was a tall stool. He hurried closer and at the professor's urging, he clambered up onto the stool and seated himself.

Suddenly the Sorting Hat was dropped over his head where it fell almost to his shoulders. Harry wrinkled his nose. It smelled bad.

"You try sitting upon over 10,000 heads and then tell me how you smell, young Potter!" The Hat retorted. Harry gasped. Had it read his mind? "It is how I do my job, youngling. Now, let us see. Where might it best be for you to go?"

"Do I get a choice?" Harry asked the Hat.

"I do see several possibilities," mused the Hat. "What preference do you have?"

"I suppose... anywhere would be all right. I just don't want to lose Draco or Professor Snape as friends."

"You've never had a friend, have you?" Harry got the feeling that the Hat was smiling. "No, indeed, you haven't. Such a tenacious child! I can see how you already are towards the Malfoy boy and Snape. Do they know the friend they've made in you." The Hat hummed suddenly, and Harry frowned. "Friends. I doubt you'd make many friends, though. Not like a Hufflepuff."

"You have to be careful about who you make as friends or they will hurt you," Harry said darkly.

"Oh indeed! I couldn't agree more!" The Hat chuckled and Harry squirmed.

"I do see a bit of bravery... there. But, hmmm, is that rather more survival than true bravery?"

"I don't know what you mean?" Harry said stonily.

"You've had a hard life, child. You'll need those that will stand beside you, no matter who..." Harry felt the Hat shifting, almost turning, he thought. "There are enemies that we can see, and then there are those enemies who are blind to what truly matters. Many qualities you have, young Potter, and you would benefit in ways from any of the Houses. However, I do know what matters and so I shall send you to..."

**SLYTHERIN!**

For a moment there was silence and then came Draco's cheer as the Hat was pulled from Harry's head. A none too friendly nudge came from McGonagall as she directed him towards the Slytherin table. Happily, Harry sat down beside Draco who patted him upon the back.

Snape plastered a brief look of incredulity upon his face, for the benefit of those who glanced his way, but the truth was, he really wasn't surprised by the Hat's Sorting.

Harry was a Survivor. He'd had to be in order to reach the age of 11. Snape had no doubt that Harry had learned many of the same skills he himself had learned in his efforts to avoid first his own father, and then, the bullies at Hogwarts.

What rather pleased Snape was the absolute gobsmacked expression upon the Headmaster's face. For a moment, Snape was just the tiniest bit worried that the old wizard might have been having a heart attack. He recovered quickly, though, and soon led all the students in a faint round of applause for Harry.

Breakfast resumed quickly as Harry renewed his friendship with Draco and met a few other Slytherins who were pleased to have him in their house.

Blaise Zabini, a gregarious sort of boy smiled winningly at Harry and, like Draco, thumped him on the back. He was also well greeted by another boy who introduced himself as Teddy Nott.

Midway through breakfast hundreds of Post Owls flew in and over their heads. Letters and packages were dropped down from the air to their recipients. Draco let out a whoop as a small package of sweets and a letter from his mother dropped into his lap. Harry, who wasn't expecting anything, was delighted when Hedwig landed by his pumpkin juice and dropped a small note by his plate.

"Hedwig!" the owl cooed happily and lightly nipped his wrist as Harry stroked her soft, feathered breast. "I'm so glad to see you."

"Wow!" gasped Blaise.

"A Snowy!" marveled Teddy.

"She's beautiful, Harry," added Draco.

"Hedwig was a birthday present." Harry didn't offer anymore information. He was busy opening the note and did not see the curious look that Draco gave him. "It's from Hagrid! He's invited 'me and my friends' to tea after classes today." Harry looked up from the note. "Want to come, Draco?"

Draco hesitated. The large man sort of scared him, and he had a really big dog, too. After a few seconds, he nodded. "Yeah. I'll go with you."

Pansy, whom Draco had been doing his best to ignore that entire morning, sneered and her reedy little voice piped up, "He's a servant,

Draco. You really ought to be more careful in regards to your associations."

Draco's tummy flipped unpleasantly at the sudden fluttering of eyelashes Pansy gave him. He sneered back at her, "If he's a friend of Harry's then he's a friend of mine!"

Pansy's beady little eyes narrowed sharply and then she sniffed in derision.

Harry felt warmth suffuse his heart at Draco's words. Neither boy would realise until they were both much older what a powerful, yet subtle magic, the youngest Malfoy had invoked with his simple declaration.

Just after breakfast, Snape, who was heading to his first class of the day, was stopped by Dumbledore. "My office, Severus. Now." Dumbledore swirled away in robes of grey silk and purple velvet trimmed in gold. Snape sighed heavily, and followed.

The Headmaster was pacing before his fireplace. He turned an accusing look upon his Potions professor. "I suppose you expected this, Severus?"

"Not expected, Headmaster, but suspected it may happen. Slytherin may have the reputation of breeding Dark Lords, but it also seems to be the House where children with not so very ideal homelives get Sorted."

"I expect you to treat Harry as you do all your Snakes, Severus," replied the Headmaster.

Snape kept his expression impassive. He knew what the Headmaster meant to imply; that he would be unmerciful to the boy because he resembled his father. Snape had to admit to himself that he might have done that had he not learned of the boy's situation, rescued him, and then gotten to know him a little. Harry looked like a miniature James Potter, but within the child there was a great deal that was Lily.

"Severus?" demanded the Headmaster.

Snape bowed slightly. "The boy is of my House now, Headmaster. Regardless of my feelings towards Potter's father, he is one of my Snakes and will be treated as all of them are."

Dumbledore breathed a slight breath of relief. "Good. Good. Then, as his Head, I expect you to take him on Saturday to pick up his things for school. I'll transfer his family's Gringott's key to you." Dumbledore turned back towards the fire, and Snape left the old man's office.

A seventh year Slytherin prefect escorted Harry from the Great Hall and to Slytherin House. In order to enter the common room, Harry had to give a password to a portrait of the intimidating Salazar Slytherin.

Tara Anglaise, the prefect, explained, "We change the password once a week. You'll get a destructible memo with the password on it, so be sure to memorise it before it turns to ash. She showed him into the common room.

Slytherin House was deep in the dungeons below castle Hogwarts. The common room itself had six long, narrow windows that looked out over the Mer City beneath the Black Lake. That leant a greenish tinge to the entire room. However, it was well lit by torches that flickered to life when the two Slytherins entered.

The room itself sprawled sinuously and allowed for several convenient indentations where there were tables set up with ink and parchment. The main room was furnished with heavy oak furniture upholstered in green velvet and silver trim. Against one wall was an impressive library of books.

"You're allowed access to only those books you can reach, Harry," explained Tara. "If you think you need one higher, then come to me, or Gordon Billock, the other prefect. We'll also check over any of your homework on Sundays."

"That'll help a lot," remarked Harry.

"So will your study group. Professor Snape has already approved you for Draco's study group. That consists of Teddy Nott, Millicent Bulstrode, and Pansy Parkinson. Professor Snape's office hours are posted there, by the door." Tara pointed. On Fridays, if he's not

dealing with a detention, Professor Snape will come in the common room and answer any questions you might have on any subject, but mostly Potions."

"He's a good teacher?" asked Harry.

"Strict, but he's fair to us Snakes. Now, come over here. You need to review our House Rules." Tara led him to a gilt-edged board that held a series of Rules that had been neatly calligraphed in scarlet ink.

For a moment, Harry quietly read the rules to himself.

1. Your House is your family. Family stands together.
2. The common room does not belong to YOU. It belongs to everyone. Keep it neat.
3. Arguments with another Slytherin are only permitted in Slytherin House. Refer to the FIRST RULE.
4. Study time is QUIET time and is mandatory. You will receive schedules on a weekly basis.
5. NO ONE is allowed to skip House meetings. House Meetings are almost always scheduled.
7. The Hogwarts House Elfs are not your servants. Keeping your dorm rooms and the common room clean is your responsibility.
8. Dorm inspections once a month. These are NOT scheduled. You are forewarned.
9. All meals are mandatory. No sweets in your dorms. No sweets after 8pm. Those taking a Nutrition Potion will come to me or Madame Pomfrey once a week.
10. Bedtimes: First years - 9pm  
Second thru Fourth years - 10pm  
Fifth thru Sixth years - 11pm  
Seventh years - Midnight
11. Your House is your family. Family stands together.

These are the rules I expect everyone in Slytherin to follow; to the letter. They are, however, not the only rules. You will discover in your seven years here that I will give you further guidelines and rules that you can take past the walls of Hogwarts.

Finally, never forget the Secret of Slytherin:

Plan in ways a Ravenclaw finds sound  
Blend like a Hufflepuff into the background  
As for the Gryffindor, learn from their mistakes  
And be ready to react, Slytherin, swift as a snake.

*Serpens tacitus perspicaxis et celeris est*

Professor S. Snape

Harry blinked. "That doesn't seem too bad."

Tara chuckled softly. "Believe me, Harry, when you start hearing about all the other stuff the other Houses are getting away with, you might have a complaint or two." The prefect smiled. "You get used to it, though."

"What does..." Harry squinted at the Latin, sounding it out to the best of his ability. "*Serpens tackytus purse pe casis eat celery...* mean?"

Tara suppressed a giggle and then cleared her throat. "It's the Slytherin motto, Harry. *Serpens tacitus perspicaxis et celeris est*. It means, The Serpent is silent, observant, and swift."

Harry's eyes widened, "Wicked!"

"Pretty neat, huh? At one time, they think all the Houses had mottos, but they've been lost. Professor Snape crafted that one since he felt we needed a motto." explained Tara.

"And the secret?" asked Harry as he re-read it."

"Well, it's not exactly a secret, but the professor's probably the only one who teaches us that all the students have aspects of all the Houses in them." Tara tapped the refrain. "Plan in ways a Ravenclaw finds sound - just because Ravenclaw is the House of



the smart kids doesn't mean we Snakes aren't just as intelligent. Blend like a Hufflepuff to the background - meaning that we Snakes are clever and it's in our best interest to learn to adapt to a situation. As for the Gryffindor, learn from their mistakes - one of a Gryffindor's worst flaws is to jump into a situation before..."

Harry interrupted softly as he whispered, "The serpent is observant!" Harry understood that all too well. The best way for him to either stay out of trouble with his aunt and uncle, or avoid them, was to listen and observe. It didn't always work, but it had helped, and it was a habit he'd not lost.

"That's it, Harry!" declared Tara. "You've just earned your first points for Slytherin. Five points. Can you tell me what the last refrain means?"

Harry studied it, frowned slightly, then read it aloud, "And be ready to react Slytherin, swift as a snake. It means, that when you've observed and made your plans, then don't hesitate to act upon them."

"That's another five points, Harry. Professor Snape's going to be proud of you when he hears about this." Tara then beckoned to Harry and they went through a door to the right of the large bookcase that spiraled up. "The girls are on the left and is, of course, off limits to the boys. Just as the boys dorms are off limits to the girls."

Harry followed Tara. "How come you can come up here?" he asked.

"I only have access to the stairs. Now, Professor Snape assigned you to share a dorm with Draco since you're already friends." She tapped her wand upon a heavy wooden slat door that swung open on well-oiled hinges.

Harry peeked in cautiously. He let out a gasp as he saw the large room. There were two canopied beds draped in heavy velvet emerald curtains that were pulled back by heavy ropes of silver. The bedding was of white sheets and luxuriant patchwork quilts of green velvet and silver satin. At the base of each bed was a trunk. One obviously belonged to Draco since it was monogrammed across the top with a D and an M. Harry stepped in and looked at the pristine

trunk of stained pine and brass. This one looked like an old-fashioned pirate captain's trunk.

"Is this mine?" he asked.

Tara consulted a piece of parchment with notes from Snape on it. "Yes, the trunk is yours. It's empty, but you'll be able to fill it after you go to Diagon Alley on Saturday. Professor Snape says to make sure you look in your wardrobe."

Next to the large bed was a large wooden wardrobe that matched the bed. It had a drawer at the bottom. The top part allowed for the hanging of robes, shirts, and trousers and also offered floor space for shoes, trainers, and boots. Harry opened the wardrobe to find a set of school robes in black, with silver piping and the Slytherin crest on it.

"Tara spoke up, "Go ahead and put them on, Harry. I'll be in the common room and I'll make any adjustments that are needed." She shut the door, leaving Harry by himself.

In a sudden fit of mischiefness, Harry ran and leaped onto the bed. He giggled at the bounce and fell instantly in love with how he sank into its softness. He gave himself just a minute or two before sliding off and smoothing the quilt and putting the fluffy pillows back against the headboard.

He took another look around the room and noticed that against one wall was a small fireplace. Flanking that, and over the top of it, was a bookshelf. Draco had already placed books, ink bottles, quills, parchment, and a few mementos from home, on the left side of the shelves.

Turning away from Draco's things, Harry then grabbed the uniform and robes and looked around until he saw what was probably the door to the bathroom. Putting his hand on the S-shaped handle he lowered it. It clicked and the door swung open.

The bathroom was just as large, it seemed to Harry, as the bedroom was. There were two white and black tiled cubicles that each held a shower and a loo. Fluffy, white towels and washcloths were neatly folded and placed on an open shelf.

He smiled. He then took off his Transfigured clothes that used to be pyjamas and got into the uniform and the robes. Seeing a clothes hamper between the two stalls, he opened it and threw in his dirty clothes. He laughed as they vanished.

"I love magic!"

Harry felt a bit left out that he didn't get to attend classes until Monday, but Professor Snape had sent him a note just after he woke up in the Infirmary that he wouldn't be allowed to attend classes until he had his wand.

Prefect Anglaise was nice company, though, as she led him through the castle showing him where his classes would be, and where the library was, and more.

When Draco had his last class, they met in the Entrance Hall and Tara gave them directions to Hagrid's hut. Happy to be outside, both boys ran across the verdant grass and down a narrow path to the round, thatched hut seated on the edge of the Forbidden Forest.

Hagrid's boarhound met them, rather too enthusiastically, for both boys. Draco didn't care for anything bigger than him, and Harry, who had been chased far too many times by Aunt Marge's nasty dog, was sure the huge dog was going to eat him. They both ran from the dog and hid behind some hay bales. The boarhound, thinking this was a game, barked at the hidden boys.

Draco hated the barking, and was about to make a comment when he saw that Harry was curled up tightly and shivering. "Hey! Harry! Are you all right?"

"Make it go away, please!" Harry begged.

Draco scowled in sudden determination. He didn't care for the dog, but he didn't like how scared Harry looked. He jumped up and suddenly yelled gibberish at the dog.

"Go away you big, ugly, stinking...!" Draco finally verbalised.

"Ere now! Fang!" Hagrid came out of his hut and whistled his dog over. "You there!" glared the half-Giant at the small boy standing behind a hay bale. "Whut you doin' scarin' Fang?" he demanded.

Draco backed up only to trip over Harry. Hagrid watched as the blonde-haired boy vanished as he fell. Hagrid walked over to the hay bale to see not one boy, as he thought there'd been, but two. He recognised the other at once.

"Arry! You all righ' there, 'Arry?"

Harry unbent a little and looked awkwardly over his shoulder and up at Hagrid. "Uhm, yeah? I think so."

"Your dog scared Harry!" Draco sneered accusingly.

Hagrid looked warily down at the other little boy. "Yer Lucius Malfoy's boy."

"My father will get you sacked for hurting Harry!" Draco defended his friend the best way he knew how, by using his father's reputation as a threat.

"Draco!" Harry's fugue and fuzzy memories of Marge's dog ended abruptly as Draco's threat sank in. He scrambled to his feet. "Don't threaten Hagrid!"

Hagrid, who'd been ready to put the mini Malfoy in his place, was now puzzled and watched the brief interplay between the two boys.

"It's not a threat, Harry!" Draco was a little confused as Harry didn't seem to understand what he was doing for him. "My father isn't going to put up with someone who keeps dangerous animals around kids!"

"Yeah. Well, maybe so," Harry brushed at some straw on his robes. He sort of understood what Draco was doing. "I mean, okay, about the dog I mean, but Hagrid's my friend and I know he wouldn't hurt me. And, well, you said, any friend of mine is a friend of yours, so that makes Hagrid your friend, too. Hagrid, you wouldn't hurt Draco, would you?"

Hagrid didn't answer right away as he wasn't entirely sure what was going on. However, he did have an answer for Harry's question. "I wouldna hurt nobody, Harry. And, ifn Draco here's yer friend, why he's just as welcome here as you are."

"Yeah, well, he is." Harry turned to Draco. "Aren't you?"

Draco grinned. "Yeah. I am."

Hagrid smiled. "Well, come on in, then. Tea's brewin' and I jus' took out some fresh rock cakes."

The boys clambered over the hay bale, but both froze as Fang gamboled up to Hagrid's side.

"H-h-he's really... big," gasped Harry.

"Urgh, he's drooling!" grimaced Draco.

Hagrid efficiently took a blue cotton handkerchief out of his pocket and quickly wiped Fang's mouth. "Don' you worry yerselves about Fang. 'E's a big, ol' coward." Hagrid patted the dog's big head. "Loves ever'one, 'E do."

Neither boy intended to move, and Draco was contemplating jumping back on the other side of the hay bale.

Hagrid knelt down on one knee. "Sit you down, Fang. 'Arry? I promise you, Fang'll stay put. Now, jus' come over, slow like, an' pet his head."

Harry started to step forward, but then took a step back. Draco nudged his friend. "Can we pet him... I mean, Fang, together?"

"Sure!" encouraged Hagrid. "Come along now."

Keeping shoulder to shoulder the two boys advanced upon the dog. When they were close enough, they both stretched out a hand towards Fang's broad head. Fang met them by pushing his head against their palms. Harry was startled, but since Draco hadn't moved, he didn't either. He did hold his breath, though, and tried very hard not to think about Aunt Marge's awful dog.

Fang could smell the fear dripping off the two boys and he hated it. He was a good boy; Hagrid had always said he was. And, he liked boys. They didn't mind getting dirty and they ran just about everywhere and flew on brooms and always had sweets. Not like

girls who usually squealed if he got near them. And sometimes, girls would point their little sticks and his tail would explode in sparks. No. Girls weren't nice like boys were.

When Fang felt that some of the fear was melting away, he snuffled the boys hands to get their individual scents. One boy smelled of fancy soap and fine wool. Fang decided he would be remembered as Soapy. The other boy... worried Fang. There was an aura of hurt, of sickness about him... but he smelled of smiles, too. Fang, who was by now on his feet and enjoying the attention of many pets from the two boys, needed to show Smile that Fang was a 'good boy'. He gently nudged Smile with his side, knocking the boy to his seat. Fang drooled happily as Smile laughed. Then Soapy laughed.

Fang let out a bark of joy. He'd made two new friends!

Tea was pleasant with Hagrid, although both boys had to slip their rock cakes to Fang. They smelled wonderful, but neither Draco nor Harry had the toothy strength to bite into the hard, grey cakes.

An hour before dinner, Hagrid walked with the two boys back to the castle where Draco and Harry reprised their visit with Hagrid to Teddy and Blaise.

That evening was drawn to a close as Harry and Draco, reveling in their new independence, and their new home, had a pillow fight. They fought until exhausted, and because Draco knew a Silencing Spell, the Prefects never heard their shouts and squeals as the pillows burst, emptying the feathers over the entire room. Right on time, at 9pm, they jumped under the covers of their beds, and were soon fast asleep.

A/N: I am awed and blushing at the response to this story. Thank you to everyone who left a review or PM'd me, and thank you to all the lovely lurkers who just adore reading. I love all of you.

Let me know what you think of this chapter. I'm especially interested in what you all think of Dumbledore and of Lucius.

To readers of Second Chance: The Death Eater & The Rat: have no fear, I am working on that story as well. It is not falling to the wayside in favour of this one.

Thank you to coffeeonthepatio for the correct Latin phrase of the Slytherin motto.

Sept. 7, 1991 - Saturday

The prefect Gordon Billock, in charge of the boys dorms, was met by a gentle fog of goose feathers and down as he opened the door to Harry and Draco's dorm. He'd been sent by their Head of House to check on the two boys who had not made it to breakfast.

"Up! Up!" snarled Gordon. Taking out his wand, he splashed each boy with a chilling Aguamenti Charm.

Draco and Harry shot awake, both screeching from the chill water. They scrambled from their beds, wiping the sleep from their eyes.

"It's Saturday!" Draco snapped angrily. "I always sleep in late on Saturdays!"

"Not anymore you don't, Malfoy. Breakfast is at 9am on Saturdays and you know the rule: No meals are to be skipped and you both missed breakfast." He looked around at all the feathers. "The professor wanted you, Potter, to meet him at 10am in the Entrance Hall. I don't think that's..."

"Yes it will be!" Harry interrupted. "We can get this clean!" Harry glanced worriedly at Draco who just shrugged.

"Tempus," Gordon said as he waved his wand. He studied the glowing numbers that appeared just in front of him. "You both have a half hour. Get to it!"

Harry started scooping up the feathers the second Gordon had left their dorm. For several minutes Draco watched with a slight puzzled sneer.

"He didn't say we had to do it the Muggle way, Harry," Draco finally declared.

Harry stood up. "What? How else are we going to clean this?"

"Summon a house elf."

Harry's eyes widened. "We're not s'posed to do that, Draco!"

"Like anyone's gonna know," Draco huffed. "House elf!"



To Harry's astonishment, a short, brown-skinned little being with a large head and skinny arms and legs wearing a tea towel popped into their dorm.

"Young Masters summon Girty?" the house elf smiled and bobbed his head.

Draco ordered, "Clean this mess up."

"No! Don't!" Harry cried out. The house elf was about to snap his fingers, but stopped at Harry's order.

"Harry!" groused Draco.

"It's against the rules!" Harry's voice broke as he shouted back.

"It's a stupid rule!" Draco shouted right back.

"Is not!"

"Is too!"

"Is not!"

"Is too!"

Draco's temper went through the dungeon roof and he leapt upon Harry and started punching him. There was thumping on the stairs as Gordon slammed into the dorm. He grabbed the nearest boy, Draco, and pulled him off of Harry who was curled up into a ball, protecting his head. Knowing without seeing that his attacker was gone, Harry, still retaining his rolled up hedgehog shape, scrambled between the side of his bed and the night table.

"Corner, Malfoy!" snapped Gordon. When it looked like Draco was going to protest, Gordon glared, "NOW!"

Draco stomped over to the corner by his bed and faced it with his arms crossed over his chest and a dark frown upon his face.

Gordon bent over Harry who was whispering so rapidly that Gordon couldn't understand what the little boy was saying. He crouched down. "Potter? You okay?"

"P-please don't hit me!" he whimpered.

Gordon stood and backed away. He saw the house elf who was still awaiting orders. "Go get Professor Snape. Tell him that there's something wrong with Potter."

With a pop, the house elf was gone.

Hearing his friend's whimper, Draco's anger vanished and he turned around but remained in the corner. "Is Harry all right?"

Gordon didn't take his eyes off Harry, but spoke softly. "Draco, I think you'd better go down to the common room. Go on."

Draco was reluctant to leave, but Gordon was so much bigger than him, so he left the dorm and headed down the spiral staircase to the common room.

Just as Draco entered the common room, Snape came bursting through Salazar's portrait. He stopped to speak to no one, going up the stairs and directly to Harry and Draco's dorm. Snape did not see Draco following a few steps behind him.

Upon entering the dorm he was struck by all the feathers that were everywhere. "What in Merlin's...? Mr. Billock! What's been going on here?"

Gordon turned sharply at the sound of his Head of House's voice. "Sir, the room was like this when I came up here to wake the two kids. I told them they had to get the room and themselves cleaned up and then I left. Just a few minutes later, I heard shouts and came up to see what was going on, and Potter and Malfoy were rolling around on the floor, fighting. When I pulled Draco off of Harry..." He glanced down at the still curled up figure. "He asked me not to hit him, sir."

"You've done well, Mr. Billock. Clear everyone out of the common room, if you would? I'll take care of Mr. Potter."

Gordon nodded and then left the dorm. Draco ducked behind the open door so Gordon didn't see him. Surreptitiously he watched as Snape carefully approached the little boy.

"Mr. Potter..." began Snape.

Harry somehow managed to wedge himself tighter into his nook. "Please, I'm sorry!"

"Pot... Harry. Hush. Do you know who I am?" Harry blinked at the man in the black clothing as he crouched down in front of him. Snape approached to within a few feet before he stopped in a semi-crouch. "It's..." he blanked. What was it Poppy had said Harry had called him? he asked himself. Oh yes... that was it! "Harry, it's me, the Dark Man."

Harry blinked several times before letting out a large sigh. "Dark Man?" he asked softly.

"Yes, Harry." Snape was suddenly bowled out of his crouch and onto his backside as the small boy threw himself at the Potions Master and wrapped his arms and legs around the fallen man.

Snape did his best to adjust his position as he immediately realised there was no way he was going to be able to peel the boy off of him. Stroking the little boy's hair and patting his back, Snape began to rock back and forth.

"P-p-professor?" came a very tremulous voice from the door.

Snape couldn't turn to look, but he did recognise the voice. "Mr. Malfoy..." Harry's body tensed sharply as Snape's voice hissed. Snape calmed his tone and then spoke more softly, "Mr. Malfoy, come over here so I can see you."

Draco shuffled over until he stood in front of Snape and Harry. Like Harry, he was still in his pyjamas and his feet were bare. "What's wrong with Harry?" Draco asked and Snape realised the smaller Malfoy was ready to break down in tears as well.

"Before I can determine that, Mr. Malfoy, I need to know what happened here. Be thorough, and don't leave out a single detail." Snape's voice was soft, but there was a tinge of firmness that Draco

could tell was a lot like his father's voice when he was in trouble with Lucius.

Draco shuffled his feet, and then recited, "Last night, me 'n Harry had a pillow fight and since we got tired, we just went to bed. Prefect Billock woke us up this morning and he was mad at all the feathers and told us we had to clean them up and get dressed." Draco's eyes shot upwards, then back down to his Head of House. "Then we... uhm... we were just fighting... and..."

"You've left out part of your story, Mr. Malfoy. If you don't want to be cleaning cauldrons your entire weekend, you'd best inform me of the details you're trying to avoid."

Snape's voice underlined the threat with silken death. Draco stammered. "Y-y-yes, sir! I didn't... didn't want to pick up all the feathers and I haven't learned c-c-cleaning spells, yet, so I s-s-summoned an elf to do it." Draco paled as the Potions professor's eyes both darkened and narrowed. He gulped. "H-h-h-harry tried to remind me of the r-r-rules but I didn't listen and... and when he shouted at me I just... I just started hitting him. B-b-but he never hit back!" Two twin tears began sliding down Draco's cheeks.

In his head, Snape quickly counted to ten. Then he did so twice more. He desperately wanted to yell at the stupid child before him, but in Harry's fragile state, he didn't dare. He took a breath and then whispered, "Mr. Malfoy, get your clothes and shoes, go down to Prefect Billock and tell him you need to use his shower. I then want you to get dressed, have some breakfast, and then stay with the Prefect until I come get you."

Draco knew to hesitate in obeying would get him in worse trouble. He darted for his wardrobe, grabbed some clothing, and was out of the room before Snape had a chance to blink.

Snape sighed. Using a Featherlight Charm on the boy, he was now able to get up off the floor and carry Harry over to his bed. Snape sat down and carefully loosened the child's arms and legs.

"Harry? It's all right. It's just you and I." He caught the boy's chin in his hand and gently angled it up so he could better see the teary face. Harry sniffled and before he could wipe the mess upon his sleeve, Snape conjured a handkerchief for the child.

Harry blew his nose and then wiped his eyes with a clean corner. Snape vanished the soiled piece of cotton and conjured another. This one Harry crumpled nervously in his hand.

"I'm sorry, Uncle Vernon. I tried really hard not to hit Dudley. I didn't hurt him, did I?"

Dudley? Uncle Vernon. Those damned Muggles! Snape eyed the little boy in his arms. He stared down into the green eyes that he'd known so well as a child and a teenager. They were slightly glazed and his expression, though contrite, was afraid and confused.

"Harry. Look at me." There was no response so Snape drew the boy's gaze until he could only look at him. "Harry. I am not your uncle. Can you tell me where we are?"

Slowly Harry's green gaze focused on his teacher. Harry blinked. He wasn't entirely sure. He thought that for a moment he was at his aunt and uncle's house, but... carefully he looked around and slowly shook his head. This wasn't Privet Drive. Harry shook his head and buried his face in Snape's shoulder.

Snape sighed as he eased the small boy's head from his shoulder. "I need an answer, child. Where are we?"

Harry's voice hitched, "I d-don't know, sir."

Snape caught the boy before he buried his head again. "I want you to take a good look around. I think you do know where we are."

Hesitantly Harry looked around the room. He frowned at the feathers on the floor and the rumpled bedding that was on both beds. As he blinked he began to remember other things: the Sorting in the Great Hall, sitting with Draco and making two more new friends, the girl Prefect showing him Slytherin House. He sighed as, like puzzle pieces snapping perfectly together, it all came back to him.

"Hogwarts. And we're in my dorm in Slytherin." His face paled at the sight of all the feathers and then he looked worriedly at Snape.

Snape smiled. "We'll deal with the feathers later, Harry. Can you remember why you and Draco were fighting?"

"He called...!" Harry stumbled. Draco had been blatantly breaking the rules in calling for the house elf, but if he told, Draco would stop being friends with him. He couldn't jeopardise that! Draco was his FIRST friend!

Harry pulled away from Snape and scrambled into the center of his bed. "We weren't fighting. We... uhm... just had an argument over how to clean up the feathers. Sir."

"I'll have you know, Mr. Potter, that in all my years of teaching I have learned to discern fiction from fact." Harry stared at his Head of House. "Would you care to know the consequences of lying to your Head of House?" Snape asked nonchalantly.

Harry flinched slightly, "Wh-what consequences?" Harry asked nervously.

Snape caught the boy's gaze with his own and spoke solemnly, "I will never hurt you, Harry. I promise you that you'll never be punished the way your uncle used to punish you."

In puzzlement Harry frowned, "Then, what do you do, sir?"

"Lying and bad language will earn you the washing out of one's mouth with a spell. If you'll recall when you were in the Infirmary, Madame Pomfrey used it on Mr. Goyle." Harry smirked a little at the memory. "If you disobey the House rules, or do not do something I tell you to do, "You can lose points or earn detention."

"You... you don't..." Harry couldn't even say it, but Snape had an idea he knew what Harry meant to ask.

"There are rumours that I tend to take a cane or a ruler to a recalcitrant child, now and then, in my detentions, but that is only a rumour. I do not believe in corporal punishment."

"Corpor... what, sir?" frowned Harry.

"Spanking, Mr. Potter." Snape smirked at his Snake. "I do not, as I have said to you before, believe in raising my hand to a child."

Snape shifted on Harry's bed and gave him a stern look. "Now, would you care to revise your story about what caused the fight in here, or should I...?" Snape's wand was in his hand as he prepared to cast the Mouth Washing Charm.

Harry rapidly shook his head. "I wasn't lying!" Harry didn't want his mouth washed out, and his stomach tied into a tighter knot knowing that he was lying to Snape. He just didn't want to get his friend into trouble.

Snape regarded the young boy carefully. One didn't need to be a Legilimens to see in Harry's body language that he was lying to the Potions Master. He would not meet Snape's eyes, there was just a shine of sweat upon his upper lip, his hands were busy wringing the blanket, and, most obvious, he was protesting his denial too vehemently.

What concerned Snape was the reason for the lie in the first place, and why hadn't Draco lied to save his own skin as he usually did?

Draco did not have a sterling history in regards to having friends. It wasn't due a lack for trying, but the smallest Malfoy had grown up around the children of Death Eaters and they, like their parents, were a paranoid group. Making up a lie to save your own skin came nearly as natural as breathing. Draco was not the accomplished liar that many of his contemporaries were and Snape, who took care of his Snakes, had honed his ability to determine if a child were lying without the use of his Legilimens skill.

Knowing that he had such skill, and that Lucius was also quite accomplished at seeing through falsehood, did not stop Draco from trying. He had the in-born nature of self-preservation, and many times the smallest Malfoy earned himself a warmed bottom for lying to his father.

It was a great mark in Draco's favour that he truly felt Harry to be a true friend and that he held their friendship in such high esteem that he was willing to tell the truth in order to help his friend, regardless of the fact that telling the truth would get him in trouble.

Harry's own feelings in regards to his friendship with Draco were, quite obviously, of the same calibre since he was willing to take a punishment to protect his friend.

Snape sighed, hiding well the satisfaction that the two boys' friendship gave him. "While I find it admirable that you are willing to protect your friend, Mr. Potter..." Harry let out a slight sound of protest, but Snape held up his hand to stop him. "Allow me to finish, if you would?" Harry clamped his mouth shut. His lips thinned, but he nodded quickly. "As I was about to say, Mr. Malfoy has already explained the circumstances behind the fight." Harry's mouth relaxed and his green eyes widened. "I would like for you to confirm his story."

Harry hesitated. Had Draco really told the truth? The professor had not said what Draco had told him. What if the professor was lying? Adults lied to children all the time. Harry had even noted that his Aunt and Uncle, who doted terribly on his cousin Dudley, often lied to their son. That was a pity, Harry had often thought, for Dudley could have used a dose of truth now and again.

Harry stared into the dark man's steady gaze studiously. After almost a minute he shook his head. No, this was the Dark Man of his dreams. Harry knew, in that moment, that Professor Snape may not tell him everything, but he'd never lie. Not to him.

"I just wanted to pick up the feathers," Harry spoke through a soft sigh of relief. "Draco wanted to call an elf to do it and it says on the rules that we're not supposed to do that. I just told him that he couldn't do that and we got to shouting and then..." Harry let out a shudder. "He just started hitting me!"

The pain in that last phrase was like a knife to Snape's heart. "Did you fight back, Mr. Potter?"

Harry bit his lower lip. "I was going to. I think I really was, but then..." he frowned as he tried to describe what had happened to him. "Draco was... I mean he became D-dudley. My cousin. And all I could do was what I always do." Harry swiped angrily at a tear and then looked up at his teacher. "Draco hates me now, doesn't he?" Harry asked mournfully.

"Of course he doesn't, you silly child," Snape tried to soothe the boy with his soft, but assured tone.



"But, I yelled at him and he must have hit me because he hates me, sir!"

"Mr. Malfoy didn't hit you because he hates, you, Mr. Potter. Mr. Malfoy did not want to admit to himself that you were right in quoting the rules to him so he struck out at you. It is a failing that Mr. Malfoy has that when he is wrong, rather than admit to his failure, he either throws a tantrum or starts a fight. It is not a behavior his father tolerates, and neither shall I."

"So I did get him in trouble," Harry smacked his fist on his bed.

"This is not your fault, young man," Snape bit out firmly. "Draco is the one that brought trouble upon himself by breaking the rules."

"Then that means you're gonna punish him, and he's gonna be mad at me!" Harry accused sharply.

"Oh yes," Snape agreed, much to Harry's surprise. "I've no doubt that Mr. Malfoy will no doubt be mad at you, and I know he'll have no fondness for me either. The thing is, he will get over it, and you will be friends again."

"That doesn't make sense," Harry said dubiously. He'd had too many experiences with children and adults who got mad at him, and never got over it. "Draco's not going to get over it."

"Mr. Malfoy, like any child, dislikes being caught. It insults his pride to then have to admit that he was wrong. However, Mr. Malfoy values your friendship as much as you do, so he will get over it." Snape stood. "Now, I'm going to talk to Mr. Malfoy and then I want you to come down to the common room as soon as you're dressed."

"Yes, sir," acquiesced the little Slytherin. Harry then looked around at all the feathers. "Should I clean these up, Professor?"

"Leave them, Mr. Potter." Snape swept out of the dorm.

When Draco reached the common room after being sent down there by Snape, he looked warily at the tall, muscular seventh year Prefect, Gordon Billock.

"Uhm, Professor Snape said I ought to use your shower and get dressed, sir," Draco disliked how small his voice sounded.

Gordon seated himself in a green leather wingback chair. "Did you know, I had plans today, Malfoy?" Draco shook his head. Gordon glanced at an antique watch on a fob chain that he slipped from his pocket. "Almost noon. I don't know what the Professor has assigned for your punishment, Malfoy, but I'm going to expect an apology from you to my girlfriend, Orencia, for completely mucking up what promised to be a nice day in Hogsmeade."

Draco's dropped his head. "I'm sorry, sir."

Gordon's lips thinned. "Go shower, Malfoy. I'll expect that apology for Orencia this evening."

Pulling his clothing tight against his chest, Draco veered towards the Prefect boy's room and closed the door behind him just as the Prefect admonished, "And don't you make a mess in there!"

Ten minutes later (it was the shortest shower Draco had ever taken) he emerged in the common room in his slightly mis-matched weekend clothes: a simple blue cotton shirt and dark green trousers, and a pair of trainers. Over this were his Slytherin robes.

The Prefect was still in the common room, but it looked like he was working on some homework. Gordon looked up and pointed with his quill over at a small, round table near the tall windows that overlooked the Mer city under the lake.

"I ordered you a sandwich and some soup, Malfoy."

"Thank you, sir," Malfoy acknowledged and then went to sit at the table. It was tomato soup. Not his favourite. He grimaced, but wiped that look off his face in case the Prefect took offence. Throwing in way too many fish-shaped crackers he mashed them into the thick tomato soup with his spoon until they now looked like... urgh... a fish massacre. Swallowing tightly, he dipped his spoon into the mess and took the mouthful into his mouth. He blinked. It wasn't too bad.

Draco soon had the soup finished and began on his sandwich which was, thankfully, peanut butter and jam.

Draco was just finishing up his brunch when Professor Snape came up from the dorms.

Although he had only a few bites of the sandwich left, Draco didn't feel quite as hungry. He drank down his milk, washing away the peanut butter's threatening stickiness in his mouth.

"Over here, Mr. Malfoy," Snape walked over to the divan and Draco rose from the small table and followed.

As he seated himself, Draco asked, "Did I hurt Harry?"

"Mr. Potter will be fine, Mr. Malfoy." Draco nodded.

"Does he still want to be my friend?" Snape looked down into the smaller Malfoy's grey eyes. Draco was trying, in vain, to hide the fear that now gnawed at his belly and made him wish he hadn't eaten any of the lunch.

"I do believe that Mr. Potter is worried about the same thing, Mr. Malfoy." Faint hope and relief washed over the boy and his eyes misted. Snape ignored his need to further assure the child. At the moment he needed to address Draco's misbehavior. "I am... disappointed, Mr. Malfoy. You have been here a week and not only have you managed to disregard the rules I have set down for all my Snakes, you also got into a fight, with your friend, as if you were some sort of Knockturn Alley thug."

Draco sniffled, but didn't let his distress show any further by allowing his tears to fall. He kept his gaze as steadily as he could upon his Head of House.

"Slytherin House will be your home for the next seven years, Mr. Malfoy, and we are your family. I expect you to have respect for your House, not just in your behavior, but in the physical House itself. Keeping your dorm clean is your responsibility, not that of the Hogwarts house elves."

"But I don't have to do that at home!" protested Draco with a sullen pout on his face.

Snape glared darkly at the little boy who once again huffed, but this time, as he let go of the pout, he slammed his back against the back

of the divan. The Potions professor did not relax his glare. Draco, like many others in Slytherin, was a pampered prince, and to some degree, spoiled. Lucius and Narcissa believed that as purebloods, house elves were a privilege that should be used as such. Snape disagreed with this belief as he felt that reliance upon a servant, house elf or otherwise, made a person complacent, lazy even. He expected all of his Snakes to learn to rely upon themselves, even in something mundane as cleaning their dorms.

"This is not Malfoy Manor," Snape intoned deeply. Draco shuddered slightly. That was too much like the tone his father used when he was about to get spanked. If he weren't already sitting down, Draco's hands would have gone back to protect his bum.

Snape smirked as he saw the tell-tale twitch of Draco's arms. He then sobered his look, showing his disapproval in his eyes. The glimmer of impending tears was now welling up in the boy's silvery-grey eyes.

"You exhibited disrespect, Mr. Malfoy. For your House, your family here, for your friend, and for your Head of House when you summoned that house elf. I will not tolerate such rudeness from one of my Snakes."

A single tear splashed upon the pale cheek and Draco sniffed audibly. Snape withdrew a handkerchief from his pocket and handed it to the little boy. Draco took it, rapidly wiped at his eyes, and blew his nose upon a corner of the handkerchief. He then neatly folded the soiled corner up so the rest of the handkerchief was still usable.

"You're not going to spank me, are you, Professor?" Draco asked timidly through a snuffle.

Snape sighed, "No, Mr. Malfoy. I'll leave that up to your father." Draco paled. "Yes, he will know about this."

"What'll you do to me, sir?" asked Draco, fearing there might be something worse than a spanking. Maybe what that fifth year was teasing about the other night with the castle keeper, Filch and chains was real.

"This evening you will serve a detention with me. Until then, I want you to clean your dorm. No magic and no house elves. And, not just

the feathers. You are to make the beds, dust, and clean the bathroom."

Draco's jaw dropped. "That's going to take all day!" In reply, the student received a warning scowl from his teacher. Draco blanched, "I'm sorry, sir! I'll do it."

"Good." Draco slid forward on the divan to leave and do as he was told, but Snape stopped him. "We're not finished yet, Mr. Malfoy." Draco remained where he was and almost, successfully hid an exasperated sigh. This one Snape ignored. "You attacked a fellow Slytherin, and your friend."

"I didn't mean to," Draco whispered ashamedly.

"On the contrary, Mr. Malfoy, you did mean to, and you did not hesitate. Since before you came to Hogwarts, I have been quite concerned about your lack of control in regards to your temper. I ignored it since you are not my child, nor were you here at Hogwarts, but I will not ignore it now that you are in my House. You will learn to control your temper as befits a young man, or else."

Draco gulped audibly. He didn't want to speculate, at all, what Professor Snape's 'or else' was. "It's... it's just really hard to do that, sir. And, I really didn't mean to hurt Harry, but it's just, I just got so mad that I didn't think and next thing I knew..." Draco stopped as he realised he was babbling. Probably stupidly. He took a deep breath and stared down at his hands as he confessed, "My father is always complaining about my temper, too, sir. He says it's my worst flaw."

Snape had heard Lucius' complaints but had never stepped in with unasked for advice. He had seen Draco's interactions with other children, and even some adults. Draco's emotions lived on the surface and all it took was someone to push the right button and he exploded. Sometimes, as a guest at Malfoy Manor and when he'd been subjected to the child's more disagreeable emotional outbursts, he'd been sufficiently annoyed to show it upon his face.

The temper was inherited from his father, Lucius, and that temper had been harshly punished by Abraxas. Lucius had never struck his child in anger, but there had been times when he'd been so frustrated with Draco that he'd have to retreat from his son.

"We shall see what we can do about that, Mr. Malfoy." Snape made a mental note to speak to Lucius when he had tea at Malfoy Manor about teaching Draco a mental discipline that would help him; Occlumency. "For now, I need you to address the breach in your friendship with Mr. Potter."

Draco gave his teacher a hopeful look. He really, truly had not meant to hit Harry, and he hoped, hoped, hoped that Harry would forgive him.

"I think a formal apology is in..."

Draco suddenly interrupted, "Professor? What happened to Harry? Why didn't he fight back?"

Snape wasn't pleased at the interruption, but he expected Draco to be concerned enough to ask at some point. Draco had not registered that there was a problem deeper than the messy dorm until Snape had shown up.

The Potions professor's lips thinned in contemplation. He wasn't sure how to answer the question, especially since he felt it was Harry's place to confide in his friend. If, he ever chose to do so. However, with Draco's lack of emotional control there could be more such incidents as this one and that could potentially be damaging to Harry as well as to the budding friendship.

Snape began carefully, "Mr. Potter has not had an... ideal home life. I will not go into detail for if that is something that he wishes to share with you, he will do so. And you should not press him for detail, unless he is willing to confide in you, understood?"

Draco nodded firmly. "Sir? Do you mean that Harry's relatives have hurt him?"

Snape nodded once, but said nothing more about Harry's relatives. Anymore would be between the two friends. He did add, softly, but firmly, "What you and Mr. Potter have, Mr. Malfoy, is no less valuable than your father's treasured books or your mother's collection of jewelry. I would dare to say, it has more worth than either. See that you treat it as such."

"I will, sir." He was just about to ask his teacher if he could go up the stairs to make his apologies, when Harry emerged in a shirt, a sweatshirt jacket, a very faded pair of jeans that seemed awfully large on him, and a pair of filthy trainers that probably smelled as bad as they looked.

Draco just ignored it all and sprinted over to his friend. At Harry's involuntary flinch, Draco abruptly stopped and took a moment to catch his breath.

"I'm real sorry I hit you! I never meant to, but my temper is so rotten! Harry," Draco's voice was pleading, "I won't ever do it again. I promise."

With a bit of a shock, Harry stared at Draco. In that moment, he understood that Draco really was as terrified of losing his new friend as he was. It was... weird, but nice. Harry gave Draco a slightly lopsided smile. "It's okay."

For a moment, both boys stared at each other and then Draco shuffled one foot. "I... uhm... I gotta go clean our dorm." He moved past Harry, but then stopped. "Are we okay?"

Harry nodded. "Yeah. We are."

Beaming a smile that was a mile wide, he nearly skipped up to the first year dorms and disappeared where the stairs turned.

Harry was smiling, too, as he approached Professor Snape. "Can I help Draco, sir?"

Snape shook his head. "We have errands to complete in Diagon Alley today. But, before that, you need to have something to eat." The Potions professor looked up over at the Prefect. "Mr. Billock, order Mr. Potter some lunch and then you may leave for the day."

"Sure thing, sir!" Gordon trotted over to the Floo and quietly called the Hogwarts kitchen and requested soup and a sandwich and some milk for Harry. The food quickly arrived and Gordon levitated the tray over to the table where Draco had eaten.

"I will see you in the Entrance Hall in 30 minutes, Mr. Potter," declared Snape.

"Yes, sir!" Harry mumbled with a full mouth.

Snape strode out and was soon followed by a relieved Prefect who was looking forward to a Saturday with his girlfriend.

A/N: Next up - Diagon Alley and another revelation that continues to cause Snape to wonder about Dumbledore.

I thank everyone for the lovely reviews which I will be replying to post haste. I am tickled and bowled over by the response to this story.



Sept. 7, 1991 - Early Afternoon

Diagon Alley, though quieter this time, was still an amazing place and Harry had a hard time quashing his desire to skip happily down the street. He settled for trotting either slightly behind, or at the side of his teacher. The professor really did have a long stride.

Their first visit had been to Gringott's Bank. They were met by the goblin that had assisted Harry the first time he'd been there; Griphook.

Snape handed the key to the Potter vault over to the goblin. "Mr. Potter's vault, first, and then mine, if you would?"

Griphook's very long finger beckoned the two wizards over to the cart that would take them rocketing through the depths of the bank to their vaults. Harry enjoyed the ride and couldn't help as a bit of laughter escaped him at one point. A quick glance towards Snape assured him that his teacher wasn't disturbed by his exclamation of joy.

Once at the Potter vault, Griphook opened the great oaken door and Harry and Snape stepped in. Harry politely took the suede coin bag that Griphook gave him, but Snape was still staring around at the vault.

There was a respectable pile of galleons; perhaps just enough to get Harry through school. Snape knew that the Potters had been a very wealthy, pureblood family and he couldn't help but wonder where the rest of the fortune was. He was also disturbed by the distinct lack of personal effects. Snape knew that when Lily and James moved to Godric's Hollow, the cottage was a small one and they couldn't move many of their cherished possessions into the small house.

Where were all of Lily's keepsakes? She'd inherited at least half of her parents belongings when they'd been killed by Death Eaters. Potter should have had this vault packed with the detritus he always had. Even the man's closets were worse than anything Lucius might have had. James Potter had always liked quantity over quality and Snape recalled, how even in school, the boy had always worn something different on the weekends.

"No more than 100 galleons, Mr. Potter," instructed Snape as he motioned the goblin out of the vault where he could speak to him. "Did the Potters ever have any other vaults beside this one?"

Griphook answered, but only because he'd received the paperwork from the Headmaster that gave Trustee Custodial privileges to Severus Snape. "At one time the Potters had a total of fifteen vaults, Mr. Snape. After the death of his father, James Potter sold most of the contents, including five properties, and funneled the proceeds towards the war effort."

"Is that all that's left?" Snape asked in disbelief as he glanced over his shoulder where Harry was crouched down in front of the pile of gold. "What of his mother's things? Did his father not leave his son anything... personal?"

"That is all that is left, Mr. Snape. Mr. Dumbledore sold off Lily Evans Potter's jewelry, all the furniture, with the exception of a scrapbook of photos that she'd begun for her son." Griphook glanced around Snape to be certain that the boy was still busy counting galleons. "As for James Potter, he left an Invisibility Cloak which is now in the possession of your Headmaster. There were instructions to give it to the child for Christmas his first year at Hogwarts."

Snape sneered at the mention of an Invisibility Cloak. No wonder the Marauders had been such experts at sneaking about the castle!

"I counted them all out, Professor!" Harry announced proudly as he stepped out of the vault.

"Very good, Mr. Potter. Back in the cart. We have one more vault to go to," said Snape ushering him into the cart.

Griphook climbed in the front and as soon as the two wizards were seated, the cart sped off down into the infernal depths of the bank.

Harry almost tripped from the cart as his head was still spinning with the euphoria of the ride. Snape caught him, though, and righted the boy who was giggling inanely. Snape made a note to give him a Calming Draught once they left the bank.

Griphook slipped the heavy key into an iron door that squealed in protest as the goblin pushed the large door open. Harry had to put his hands over his ears for a second against the harsh grate of the rusty hinges.

"Can I go in with you, sir?" asked Harry.

Snape only thought a moment before nodding. "Just don't touch anything without permission. There are some fragile tapestries in there I don't want damaged."

"Okay, si..." Harry's eyes widened and he stopped so abruptly that Snape ran into him as he tried to go through the door.

There were gold galleons, and silver sickles, and brass knuts, but there were also pieces of eight in gold and silver, gold, silver, and copper goblets, and pieces of glittering jewelry that draped over all the piles of gold. Interspersed amongst the piles were old paintings that weren't moving ones like those at Hogwarts. There were also rolled up carpets and the tapestries that Snape didn't want touched.

"It's like Aladdin's cave!" gasped Harry.

"Go on," encouraged Snape. Had this been one of the other Prince vaults, he wouldn't even have let the child through the door, but in this vault the gold, silver, and copper, and most of the objects were all quite unmagical. "I need to find something, so enjoy yourself."

Harry let out a whoop, that he immediately curtailed at Snape's glare. He then ran past two large piles of coins and into the depths of the vault. Snape smirked to himself. The small boy had no idea that the Potions Master knew quite well what Aladdin's cave was.

Snape's mother, Eileen Prince Snape, had succumbed to complications from pneumonia when he was fifteen. He had been at Hogwarts and had not known at all of her illness. Tobias Snape, a notorious drunkard, could not be found and it had been Lily's parents who had sent word of his mother's death. He learned later, that it was actually Lea Evans, Lily's mother, who had found Eileen, in a cold house, alone, and had obviously succumbed to her illness some days earlier.

Although the Headmaster had offered to let him go home, the last person the teenaged Snape wanted to see was his father. He learned, that summer when he had no choice but to go home, that they'd been so poor that his father could not pay for a burial plot or a funeral. Eileen had been ignominiously buried in a pauper's grave by an anonymous grave digger. Tobias, when he had returned home, had no idea where his wife had been put to rest. It wasn't until his father was killed in a street brawl when he was 18 and just preparing to leave Hogwarts behind that Snape had learned of his true inheritance.

Thinking, at first, that his father had known about the money, but had, out of spite, never said a thing to Severus, had angered him. The old goblin who'd told him of these vaults, Catchwick, had firmly explained to him that his father couldn't have known, because his mother had not known. Snape had come into the Prince inheritance merely by default. Eileen had had no siblings and her father, Agravain Prince, had scribbled the name of his only known, living heir, onto a scrap of parchment on his deathbed: Severus Snape.

Resentful at being nothing more than the afterthought of a dying man, Snape held no desire to see the Prince family vaults. He had his own, small vault that held the little he made from selling potions. That was enough.

It was Lucius, though, who had forced him to face up to the side of his family he wouldn't acknowledge. Snape, of course, had seen little point in it since they were all dead, but Lucius had impressed upon him the importance of knowing where you came from.

The two young men had visited Gringott's together to view all the vaults. One of the most fascinating vaults had come from Elias Walter Prince. Originally, he'd been a naval Captain. Gold from the Caribbean called to him and lured him from respectable poverty to wealthy pirate. Wizarding pirates were no less notorious than their Muggle counterparts, and, Snape discovered, tended to get along with Muggles on the sea better than did land-dwelling wizard-kind.

The two young wizards had spent hours in that vault reading Elias' old logbooks and journals and sifting through chests of treasure that went from gold, silver, and copper coinage, to expensive bolts of silk. It was down in this vault that Snape had found a bolt of black silk wool. He had never felt cloth so soft, nor so luxurious before. On a

whim, he had taken the cloth, and later, when he'd received notice of his acceptance at Hogwarts as its Potions instructor, he had his first set of teaching robes made from the fabric.

There was a time that Snape held resentment towards his mother for never having told him about the Prince line. He then had to remind himself how his father had made the subject of witches and wizards and anything to do with them a forbidden subject in his house.

It wasn't until his second year of teaching at Hogwarts that Snape discovered that Eileen had found a way to at least leave a hint for her son about the family he'd come from.

Lucius had long since become bored with the Prince family vaults, for the Malfoys had their own vaults, many of which Lucius had yet to even unlock and that went further down into the cavernous depths of Gringotts. Snape had been going over the inventory that Catchwick had given him when he'd inherited the Prince vaults when he came across a list of items that tugged at his own passion, potions.

Snape had gone as soon as he could to the vault that had once been owned by Aloysius Severus Prince. Snape had learned that not only was Aloysius Severus his namesake, but that the looks he'd long attributed to his lout of a father, had come from this wizard. In the vault had been a very old painting of Aloysius with his family, two sons and a raven-haired wife, Charlotte Black. The knowledge was enough for him to finally forgive his mother. The rest he learned about Aloysius was the true gold in all these vaults.

Aloysius Severus Prince had been not just a contemporary of Nicholas Flamel, he'd been a staunch rival. Aloysius had been an alchemist and all his journals, his library, his lab notes, and much of the lab itself, had all been preserved in this vault. Snape plundered this vault to outfit his private lab at Hogwarts and his own library swelled with the journals and books he brought back to his small suite in the dungeons of the castle.

This vault that he and Harry were in now, was the original one Snape had acquired for himself when he began selling potions at seventeen. He had not intended for it to become what it was, but when he'd been somehow roped into babysitting the young, five

year old Malfoy heir, he had taken the little brat with him to Gringotts. Draco's estimation in regards to how 'boring' the vault was had led to Snape spending uncounted hours transferring the chests of gold and silks from Captain Prince's vault to here, and other treasures that he found in various of the other vaults. He had created an Aladdin's cave that glittered with gold, jewels, tapestries, paintings, and many more such delights that would hold the attention of an inquisitive, exploring child.

It was almost two years before Draco was able to see the vault again, and his expression when he saw it had been very similar to Harry's. The occasional whoop of surprise, or gasp of wonder, told Snape that Harry was getting the same joy out of the vault as Draco once had. No doubt the two boys would be sharing 'treasure tales' that evening.

Finding what he was looking for, he shrank it and tucked it into his inner robe pocket. He then turned, grabbed a few handfuls of galleons, and then went looking for Harry.

Harry had found a treasure within the treasure and was seated upon the floor that was strewn with various old coins. He wore a ruby tiara on his head and several necklaces of pearl, ruby, emerald, and other precious stones around his neck. All of this was ignored as his eyes were glued to a large, old book, that had animated, sketched images. It was one of Captain Elias Walter Prince's journals.

The pirate captain had had talent with the written word, and had also been a somewhat talented artist. His journals were liberally decorated with his sketches, many that were animated.

Snape walked up, silently, behind the little boy and watched as Harry read the words and allowed his fingers to trail over the sketches that shifted under his fingertips. In this journal, the captain was recounting his ship's encounter with a giant, white, sea serpent.

Harry watched as a sketched sea serpent rose from the sketched roiling, dark waters that held the tiny ship, the Phoenix. Up, up, and up rose the great beast of the watery depths, dwarfing the tiny ship below it. It opened its great, toothsome maw and bent to crash downwards upon the ship, but the captain and his crew took out their wands. They aimed and the beast was caught in a blinding sphere of yellow-blue light. The death throes of the serpent brought

it nearly crashing down onto the ship, but it just missed it. The waves that rose up, though, swept over the side of the ship catching one, hapless crewman and dragging him back down into the swirling sea.

"Oh no!" gasped Harry.

Snape allowed himself a small smile at the child's reaction, but remained quiet as Harry quickly flipped the page to the next drawing. At his touch, the sketch came to life. Captain Prince was at the railing as pencil-drawn sparks fell from his wand. The sparkles vanished into the sketched sea where they drew the fallen crewman from the water. The rest of the crew rushed in like a swarm, gathering around the injured man, tending to him. Soon, he was coughing, and the other crewmembers were cheering at his revival.

"Yes! Way to go!" crowed Harry.

Snape dropped a coin to let Harry know he was near. Harry flinched only a little. Snape expected him to perhaps drop the book, but the story so captivated him, that Harry could not let go of the journal. He raised it up towards his teacher.

"This is a terrific story, Professor! Would it be all right if I read the rest? I really want to know how it all comes out." Harry's green eyes sparkled and Snape allowed a very small smile to ghost at the corner of his mouth.

"As you described it, this is Aladdin's cave. Anything you find you may either keep, or borrow. That, since it tells the story of one of my ancestors, you're welcome to borrow." Snape gave the small boy a stern look. "I expect you to treat it as the treasure it is, Mr. Potter."

Harry closed the book carefully and held it against his chest. "I will, sir. I promise."

Snape gestured for the book, and just for a very short moment, Harry hesitated before handing it over. He watched as Snape shrank it, then hid it away in his pocket. Snape then divested Harry of the tiara and the jewels that he had festooned himself with. He knelt down when he saw the glitter of a too large ring upon Harry's thumb.

Holding the small boy's hand, he stared in wonder at the silver ring that held a small, cut emerald in it. "Wherever did you find this, Harry?" He asked in wonder, forgetting to address the boy more formally.

"That cup over there," said Harry pointing with his other hand. "I picked it up and this fell out." Harry took the ring off and handed it to Snape. "It's really shiny and green."

Snape held the small ring in the palm of his hand. The silver was a bit tarnished, and the emerald had not been of the highest quality. It hadn't mattered to him. The colour had perfectly matched Lily's eyes. Snape had collected every knut, sickle, and galleon he had to have this ring made specifically for Lily on her 15th birthday. Unfortunately, before he'd had a chance to give it to her, Snape had been notified of his mother's death and the following circumstances of that year made it impossible to give it to her.

Unfolding himself from his crouch, he summoned a ring box. One box beat out several others in leaping to Snape's hand. He took out the gold ring that was within, tossed it upon the heap of gold bullion, and gently placed the old silver and emerald ring within it. He then handed it to Harry.

"This belongs to you, Mr. Potter," he spoke solemnly.

Harry took the small ring box and beheld the ring settled upon the black velvet. "But, Professor Snape, sir," he whispered as he stared at the ring. "This must cost... I mean, it must be worth more than any of this stuff in here!"

Snape regarded the small boy. His horn-rimmed glasses hung askew on his face and his messy hair was growing out, and although he still looked quite a bit like James Potter, Snape didn't seem to mind so much anymore. It was what was inside that mattered, that shone through those emerald eyes of his mother. Harry was fast revealing that, in the positive, he was a kind, thoughtful, and very polite child. Despite his vile relatives, somehow, Merlin only knew, Harry had retained the innocent, wondering air all children had.

He gave Harry the small, half-smile that only touched the corners of his mouth and nodded. "You're so very right, Mr. Potter. That ring is



a treasure that is worth more than anything than all the vaults in Gringotts."

Harry looked in awe down at the ring. "Really? Why?" He pushed it back towards Snape. "Sir, you ought to..."

Snape closed the ring box and closed both of Harry's hands over it. "I can't keep it, Harry. It would have been a gift for your mother, but...circumstances prevented her from ever receiving it. I would be pleased if you kept it for her."

Harry looked up into the dark eyes as he heard the sadness in his teacher's voice. He wanted to ask more questions about the ring, but he saw a glint of pain, too, in his teacher's eyes. He decided to leave the questions for later. He tucked the ring into his pocket, making certain that it was safe.

As they were leaving the bank, Harry slipped his hand into Snape's. For Harry, it assured him that he'd be better able to keep up with the long legged wizard. For Snape, it was another sign of Harry's trust in him, and it warmed him just as a gust of a cool breeze swept down the street.

Their first stop after the bank was an appointment Madame Pomfrey had made with the Oculist. The Eye Healer was Dominic Dymshank, a slightly beefy man who moved laconically and smiled and laughed a lot. Harry hardly knew his eyes were being examined until Healer Dymshank directed Harry out of the exam room to the waiting room.

In the exam room, Healer Dymshank spoke to Snape. The wizard's smile faded as he indicated two chairs for them to sit upon. Snape took his chair reluctantly, sitting stiffly, prepared for the worst.

"How often has the boy been subjected to head injuries, Professor Snape?" asked the Healer rather bluntly.

"Head injuries?" Snape's heart plummeted to his feet as anger at the evil Dursleys bloomed like a dragon's breath of flame in his breast.

"As an Oculist, and a wizard, I have rather more intricate and sophisticated diagnostic spells at my disposal. I am able to discern old injuries that affect the eyesight now." With a wave of his wand he brought up a three-dimensional image of what was more than likely

Harry's eyes and optical nerves. Every section was coded with a different colour. "Do you see those red patches" The Healer pointed out nearly a dozen of the red patches that glowed various shades of red, and even though he didn't entirely know what they were, Snape felt his stomach tighten into a knot at the sight of them.

"What do they indicate, Healer?" asked Snape tautly.

"Old bruising and scarring, sir. This one," and he tapped the darkest of red patches. "This is the oldest. It indicates that there was an injury to Harry's head at about four years of age. This one, I believe, is what exasperated what would have been a mild problem that could have been corrected in adulthood. Unfortunately, this, combined with the other injuries, means that magical means cannot be used directly upon the eyes or optic nerves to repair the deficiencies in his eyesight."

Snape stiffened his back at the impulse to slump in horror. Those damned Dursleys! "Can his eyesight be helped by glasses?"

At this, the Healer smiled, "Yes. Glasses combined with several Corrective Spells will provide him with 20/20 vision. It will take a bit of adjustment so Harry will need to come back so I can fine tune the lenses for him." The Healer rose to his feet. He began to pace and Snape watched him uneasily, dreading even worse news.

"Professor Snape. As a Healer I am obligated to report those past injuries to Childrens Services. I have no doubt they are a clear indication of abuse." He looked down at the seated wizard. "Were you aware of this?"

Snape rose to his feet. He did not care for the condescending feeling he was receiving from the Healer as he sat beneath the man. He gave Dymshank a curt nod. "It was recently discovered that his current guardians in the Muggle world have not had Mr. Potter's best interests at heart. However, I would ask that you hold your report..."

"Sir, I cannot..." began the Healer with a slight vehemence.

Snape held up his hand. "Healer, I do understand the legal concerns and I am not asking you to completely withhold your report. I am asking that you delay it. As you saw, this is Harry Potter and his is a rather delicate situation."

The Healer scratched his chin. "Muggles, you say?" Snape nodded. "Has he a guardian here in our world?"

"As his Head of House, I do act as In Loco Parentis during the school year. However, in Mr. Potter's case, the final word belongs to Albus Dumbledore." Snape tried not to show his disagreement with that situation between himself and the Headmaster.

"And, the Headmaster knows?" asked Dymshank.

"He does." Snape's teeth ground, audibly as he considered several thoughts, but then returned to the original. "Two weeks, Healer Dymshank. Could you hold your report for two weeks?"

Slowly the Healer nodded. "Two weeks, then, Professor. For now, let us get Harry fitted with glasses."

While Harry looked at all the frames, the Healer gave the boy a more edited version of his vision problems, and to Snape's silent gratitude, nothing was mentioned of any past injuries.

Harry stood in front of a rack of frames, but did not pick anything out. After ten minutes of this, Snape intervened. "Mr. Potter, you can't pick out something appropriate if you don't try something on. Are there any frames that appeal to you?"

Harry cast a stricken look at his teacher, and to Snape's surprise, the small boy gave him a little finger beckoning that clearly meant the boy wished to speak to him, privately.

Snape walked over to Harry and leaned over slightly, to be able to better hear the boy if he should whisper. Harry did, but at least he aimed his voice towards his teacher. "None of them have any prices, sir. Aunt Petunia always said glasses were really expensive."

Snape's eyes narrowed and a small sneer appeared on his face at mention of the detested woman. "You need not concern yourself with the cost, Mr. Potter. Just choose something that you like, and..." Snape caught the boy's arm as he went to grab a pair of frames. "And, do not choose any frames only because you think I am hurrying you. You are allowed to take your time." Snape glanced

around the waiting room and saw a row of chairs by the entrance. "I shall wait over there."

"Okay, sir. Thank you," Harry said softly, with a small smile. He watched to be sure that his teacher was seated and then he returned his gaze to all the frames.

After another fifteen minutes, and after trying on about ten pairs of frames, Harry found himself torn between two. When Snape recognised the dilemma, he spoke up. "Bring them over here, Mr. Potter, and let me have a look."

With a grateful smile, Harry brought the two frames over to his professor.

One set of frames was slim, gold wire, oval shaped, and with ear pieces that curled around the back of the ear. The other pair were made of Bison horn and looked rather like highly polished black marble. They weren't oval, but a bit more square with straight ear pieces.

The Bison horn frames reminded Snape entirely too much of James Potter, only because they were black, and he felt an instant dislike for them. Counting, internally, to ten, he pushed aside that old rivalry and scrutinised the frames from a purely aesthetic view.

"Turn to the side, Mr. Potter," he instructed. Harry did so. "Hmmm. I'm afraid you look a bit like a Ministry clerk, Mr. Potter. They're quite heavy looking and appear to overshadow your features. How do they look to you?"

Harry turned away from Snape so he could look into the mirror on the wall. He shook his head as he studied himself. "I look sorta old like Mrs. Figg down the street," commented Harry.

Figg? Arabella Figg? "Who," Snape asked slowly, "was Mrs. Figg?"

Harry was removing the Bison horn frames as he replied, unaware that he'd said something that set off his teacher's internal alarms. "My babysitter. Aunt Petunia didn't like her cause she had a lot of cats and smelled funny. She was nice enough, though and I liked her cats."

Snape ground his teeth as his hands clenched tightly together. It was the same witch he knew. That dotty squib who, for some unknown reason to him, had been part of Dumbledore's Order of the Phoenix. The few times that he'd interacted with the woman, she couldn't stop talking about her cats. She was distressingly graphic about the more disagreeable, physical aspects of the animals. He, who had no qualms about squeezing the disgusting contents of a Bubotuber, had actually felt ill after Arabella Figg had regaled him with a colourful, descriptive recitation of one of her cat's hairballs. He'd been thankful the inane woman hadn't thought to bring along a photograph!

What was Figg doing on Privet Drive? How long had she been there? If, as Harry said, she had been his babysitter, why had she not ever seen any signs of abuse?

Indeed. The woman was dotty, but Snape did not think that she was unobservant. He recalled all too clearly Madame Pomfrey's medical history on Harry. Far too many of his injuries would have been difficult to hide.

That decided it. He already had intentions to visit Privet Drive, but now he wanted to speak to Figg, if she was even still there. First, though, he needed to speak to Lucius. The report that the Oculist threatened to deliver to Childrens Services could muck everything up. What little he did know of the Headmaster's machinations, the Dursleys were important to them. Should they be arrested and removed as Harry's guardians, there was no telling what Ministry interference might do.

The Headmaster was a powerful wizard, but even he had to bow before the Ministry if they chose to act against his plans.

Harry could wind up someplace worse than the Dursleys. He could wind up right in the arms of an enemy's family!

"Sir?" Harry interrupted his thoughts, and Snape realised that the boy had been trying to garner his attention for several seconds. Harry wore the second pair of frames, and Snape had to settle himself within in order to give the frames proper scrutiny. "What do you think, Professor? They feel kind of light."

Snape nodded. "They appear rather better than the other ones, Mr. Potter." He wouldn't say it, but the frames were of such thin, gold wire as to nearly be unnoticed. It allowed for his green eyes, Lily's eyes, to be properly seen. "Do you like them, Mr. Potter?"

Harry turned again to look at himself in the mirror. He smiled shyly. He did like them. He felt a bit more grown up in the frames. "Yeah... I mean, yes, sir. I really like these."

Harry firmly decided on the wire frames and so the Healer fixed lenses into the glasses, added a few Corrective Spells, and then gave some final instructions to Harry and his teacher.

"Headaches are common, but those generally have to do with some of the Corrective Spells exercising muscles in the eye that have not been disciplined. They're mild and can be alleviated by rest or a Headache Potion. If you're getting migraines, Harry, that isn't normal, and I'd like you to tell Professor Snape at once so he may contact me. A little bothersome blurriness or dizziness is part of the adjustment period, but if that gets excessive, again, tell your professor. I would like to see you in a week, then." The Healer smiled and Harry grinned.

Snape nodded in understanding, making mental notes. In minutes, they were able to leave the Oculist's office with Harry wearing his new glasses and exclaiming over their clarity.

Harry hated Madame Malkin's Robes & Dress Shop. Well, not the shop. The owner. Madame Malkin was a sour-faced woman perhaps in her 50s with greying brown hair. Her hair was in a tight bun with what looked like chopsticks stuck in it. She fussed. She didn't stop talking. And she complained so horribly over having to make new robes for Harry, that he felt unusually close to losing his temper. He did crack when she had finished with the complaints and began to insult him; saying he was small, and skinny, 'rangy like a plucked chicken'.

That was it for Harry. Instead of hitting the woman, which was very tempting, he swallowed his anger, and the second Madame Malkin turned away from him, he tossed off the scraps that would eventually become his new robes, jumped off the fitting stool, and dashed out into the street. He peered up and down, wondering where his teacher could have gone.

Well, he sort of knew. Professor Snape had told him, before dropping him off at Madame Malkin's, that he had to pick up some things at the herbalist shop that weren't available in the greenhouses at Hogwarts. But, where was it?

He knew he ought to just stay put, but Harry doubted that anything could hurt him on Diagon Alley. So, picking a direction, he ran down the street, his head swiveling left, then right, as he kept an eye out for Snape. He skidded to a halt when he saw the opening to a rather dark looking street. He looked up and saw a weathered sign waving, and squeaking, that read Knockturn Alley.

Harry approached Knockturn Alley with trepidation. He wrinkled his nose at the peculiar smell that wafted towards him from the dark alley. It made him pause.

It smells horrid and doesn't look any better, Harry's mind stated the obvious. Stay away! his inner voice warned. This was the one that always spoke to him and advised him on what to do if Vernon or Dudley were coming after him. No, he thought, the professor wouldn't be down there. Maybe I ought to go back... A toothless old hag with some very questionable... things in a basket smiled at him. Most of her teeth were black with rot. He reeled backwards.

Harry let out a squawk as hands gripped him tightly and he found himself half-trotted and half-carried away from Knockturn Alley.

"Where do you think you were going, young man?" demanded Snape, towering over Harry imperiously.

Snape still had his upper arms in his grip and Harry's teeth chattered as he stuttered, "I-I-I wasn't g-g-g-going in there, sir!"

Seeing the look of utter fright on the boy's face, Snape abruptly let Harry go. He'd frightened the child more than Knockturn Alley had. A cold lump formed in his belly as he took a step away and then crouched down. "Mr... Harry," he spoke softly. "Harry, I'm sorry. That's a terrible street for a little boy to enter and it... it frightened me when I saw you there."

"I wasn't going to go there, Professor!" Harry spoke rapidly. "It smelled awful and then that scary witch smiled at me and she had..."

there were crawly things in her basket... " Harry closed his eyes tightly as he heard his voice beginning to rise. He hated when it did that. That's when he'd start to beg his uncle to stop. "Wait..." Harry said softly as what his teacher had said to him finally registered. "You were... afraid? For me?"

A part of Snape wished he'd not revealed that much, but he could see that it was important to the boy. Harry had probably never heard anyone voice their concern for him. Snape touched Harry's cheek and found it warm. He rose out of his crouch. "Come along, Mr. Potter. I think we both are in need of a small break." Harry didn't hesitate to slip his hand into Snape's and Snape squeezed the small hand, not tightly, but firm enough to reassure the child that he didn't mind this at all.

There was a cafe nearby, so they both stepped inside. Snape ordered a large coffee while Harry ordered a hot chocolate with extra marshmallows. The September weather was still pleasant so Snape directed the small boy outside and to a round table with a glass top and shaded by a bright, multi-coloured umbrella.

Harry blew on his hot chocolate and enjoyed watching as the small marshmallows slowly melted in the heated beverage. He took a few cautious sips and was pleased at the warmth and the sweetness.

"What's your coffee taste like, Professor? It smells good."

Snape gave Harry a slightly puzzled look at the odd, out of the blue question, and then he gazed down into the blackness of his coffee. "Mine is bitter, but rich," he answered carefully. "Of course, it does depend on the blend one indulges in, and additives such as extra flavours or sweeteners."

Harry sipped his chocolate. "What do you like, sir?"

Snape smirked in amusement at the small boy, and then leaned back in his chair. What a sublimely odd conversation he was engaging in with Harry Potter! "I suppose my favourite would have to be a coffee that is dark and rich in flavor. I prefer my coffee to wake me up."

"So you don't fall asleep in class," interjected Harry. He was enjoying this conversation. He sort of felt like a grown up. Harry



didn't notice that his legs, which didn't reach the ground, were swinging happily under his chair.

"That would be disastrous, both to my classroom and my reputation." Snape picked up a napkin and Transfigured it into a small cup. He poured a measure of his coffee into the cup and pushed it smoothly over to Harry.

Harry put aside his half finished mug of hot chocolate and put his hands around the cup of coffee. It did smell good. Like warm memories. He lifted the cup to his lips, blew over it, just in case, and then took a careful swallow.

And thought his face was going to turn inside out.

"Gah! That's really bitter!"

To Harry's surprise, the Potions Master laughed, richly, for a few seconds. Then, with a wave of his wand, he Vanished the small cup of coffee. Harry reached for his hot chocolate and took a mouth cleaning gulp.

"You like that, Professor?" Harry grimaced for emphasis.

"I do indeed, Mr. Potter. However, as I said before, there are all kinds of coffees, and many different ways to prepare the coffee bean. It is possible you may discover one you like," Snape declared.

Harry's next question caught Snape off guard, but only for a moment. "Are coffee beans used in any potions, sir?"

Snape had not, yet, had the boy in class, but he was heartened by the question. He had held some reservation that Harry might take after his father, and not be at all inclined towards Potions.

Slipping subtly into teacher mode, he replied, "As a matter of fact, the coffee bean is used in quite a few potions, Mr. Potter. Many stimulant type potions use the coffee bean. There is also a Migraine Potion that relies heavily upon the caffeine in the coffee bean for its efficacy."

"Wicked!" enthused Harry. "I can't wait for Potions class!" Harry brought his hot chocolate up for a large swallow since it had cooled considerably.

Harry smiled over the rim of his mug at his teacher. He was suffused with warmth, more than what the hot chocolate had sent through him. The professor had scared him, at first, when the older man had discovered him at the mouth of Knockturn Alley, and grabbed him. But, Professor Snape wasn't angry at me! He was scared FOR me!

As for Snape, he was mulling over in his thoughts the curious fact that Arabella Figg had been Harry's babysitter. To his knowledge, if she had ever reported any abuse to the Headmaster, he didn't know of it. It bothered him that he felt that if she had, Dumbledore would have done nothing about it. All for the sake of Blood Wards which did nothing to protect Harry from his relatives.

What if Harry had died in their care? Those red patches the Oculist had shown him angered Snape. The broken bones and the bruises were certainly reprehensible enough, but to hit a child, a four or five year old, in the head with such strength that the eyes were permanently damaged?

And Dumbledore wanted to send the boy back with a few Protection Spells wrapped around him? Did it not matter that Harry would be alone? Possibly not fed. And if they couldn't touch him, what would stop the verbal abuse? In Snape's opinion, that was no worse than beating a child.

It made no sense, which meant that there was more to this insanity than Snape knew. The Headmaster could be tactless, even thoughtless, but Snape was well aware that beneath that sherbet lemon, kindly old man exterior, there beat the heart of an old warrior; a general, who would not be stopped if he knew he were doing the right thing.

Just how did that 'right thing' involve Harry?

Snape finished his coffee, removing his thoughts from the Headmaster, Figg, the Dursleys and mysteries. Right now, he and Harry needed to finish their errands.

"Were you finished early at Madame Malkins, Mr. Potter?" asked Snape.

Harry shook his head and licked at the chocolate that lined his upper lip. "She kept complaining about having to re-make all my school robes, and then she said I was a small, rangy chicken!" Harry scowled. "She seemed to think I should find that funny! It's not! I know I'm small, but so what? Lotsa kids are. She's mean, Professor." He finished the last sip of his hot chocolate. "Do we have to go back?"

"I'm afraid we do. This time, though, I'll stay with you and do my best to keep Madame Malkin's concentration centered on your robes."

"Thanks, Professor!"

When Snape and Harry returned to the robe shop, Madame Malkin was far too insulted over the fact that Harry had run out of her shop and told Snape in no uncertain terms that she was done with the 'rude, little boy!' She did not chase them out, though, but had her assistant take care of Harry.

Cherie was a nice and pretty young lady who wore her brown hair in a loose braid down her back. A magical measuring tape danced obediently around her and she had dozens of pins in a small cushion upon her wrist. She quickly draped the robes pieces back over his shoulders and smiled.

"Such a handsome young man," she smiled as she chalked a few markings on the cloth. "How do you like Hogwarts so far, Harry?" Cherie asked as she began to pin the pieces together.

"It's great!" he replied. "It's got moving staircases and portraits that talk to you, and I just bet it's full of secret passages and neat stuff like that."

Cherie chuckled and removed a few pins to adjust the robes. Harry continued, "Professor Snape teaches Potions there. I haven't gone to his class, yet, but I bet it's really interesting."

Cherie shot the stiffly sitting Potions Master a charming smile and he shifted uncomfortably in his chair. "Why do you think Potions is so interesting, Harry?" she asked him.

"Well, you get to mix all these different things like plants, and coffee beans, and even chicken livers to make all sorts of stuff. I read Draco's book an' he told me that it's a really hard class but it's the best one because Professor Snape is the smartest teacher in school. Draco said he's a Potions Master and that means that he knows everything!"

Snape rolled his eyes, but his cheeks tinged slightly as the assistant caught his eye, again, and smiled at him.

Cherie had Harry turn around as she assessed her pinning and measurements. She then looked at Snape. "Professor, what do you think?"

Snape scowled at the woman. "They're unstitched robes," he replied acerbically.

Cherie laughed and her annoying measuring tape decided to dance around his head. "I see that nothing gets past you, sir!" Snape huffed in annoyance and slapped at the measuring tape. It darted away from him and spiraled around Harry's head before going off to dance in a corner where a rack of dresses hung.

Cherie turned Harry again, made a few more adjustments, and then placed her hands upon her hips and nodded her approval. "I think a two years Growth Charm ought to work just fine." A wave of her wand and the robes slipped up over Harry's head and shimmered across the room before disappearing through a doorway into a back room.

"Now, Harry, dear," Cherie began as a small notepad floated towards her and she snatched it out of the air. "Three sets of robes for school ought to suffice, until the end of October. Another three sets will be of a warm, wool blend for winter. If you need new or additional robes, I'll keep your measurements on file. Scourgify works wonders on surface debris, but do keep the robes regularly laundered. They'll last longer that way."

Once his school robes were taken care of, the two wizards stepped outside of the shop and Snape regarded Harry as they walked up the street.

"Why are you smiling like a lovestruck loon, Mr. Potter?" smirked Snape thinking he knew why the boy had such an expression upon his face.

Harry's cheeks coloured. "I'm not lovestruck!"

"Really? You appeared to be quite enamored of the young lady," teased Snape.

"No I wasn't!" scowled Harry. "What's enamoured mean anyway, Professor?"

"Enamored," he replied, correcting Harry's pronunciation. "It means to like someone so much that you may be falling in love."

"Yuck." Harry tried to walk ahead of his teacher in indignation, but Snape's long legs soon caught up to him and Harry was quickly tired of walking so fast to keep up a pretense. Snape slowed his walk and Harry took the older man's hand into his again. "Where are we going next, sir?"

"We're going to pick up your textbooks, and then I think a visit to the Muggle side of London is in order," replied Snape.

They crossed the street for Flourish and Blott's. Harry asked, "Why are we going to Muggle London, sir?"

"There are several stores there that carry everyday clothing that's less expensive than the shops here in Diagon Alley," replied Snape. As they walked through the door of the book shop, a bell overhead chimed, announcing their arrival.

Harry followed his teacher to the main counter where a white-haired man with round spectacles sat. He was reading, *Hogwarts, A History*.

"Hello, Professor Snape!" smiled the old man. "How are you doing today?"

"Quite well. I'm here to pick up the order for Harry Potter."

Harry had slyly stepped just close enough to his professor that he was somewhat hidden by the folds of the older wizard's robes. The old book seller peered down at him.

"I'm going to make a guess and say that you must be Harry Potter." He smiled warmly and Harry took a step away from his professor.

"That's me, sir."

"Wonderful!" He summoned a package that came zooming in and settled itself on the counter. "All brand new texts, Mr. Potter."

Harry stepped boldly up to the counter and held out his arms for the tall package. The book seller levitated the package and Harry nearly buckled under its weight. Snape caught him, steadied him, and took the package, shrinking it neatly so he could store it in one of his pockets.

"Thank you, Mr. Blotts," nodded Snape.

"Make good use of those books, Mr. Potter!" Mr. Blotts waved cheerily and then returned to his book.

"Those were really heavy," muttered Harry. "When will we get my wand, Professor?"

"Clothes first, then Ollivander's, and last will be the Apothecary."

"Oh, great! Thank you, sir!"

Harry had several pairs of new trousers, a couple pairs of shorts for the warmer months, a dozen shirts that Snape insisted could not all be purple. Purple, it seemed, was Harry's favourite colour. He also got a pair of boots, in black leather, to go with his school uniform, a new pair of trainers, socks, t-shirts, and pants.

It was when Harry meant to pay for the clothes that he realised he only had wizarding gold. "Professor," he whispered, "I don't have Muggle money."

"It is unnecessary, Mr. Potter," Snape spoke softly so that only he and Harry could hear their conversation. "Your money is just for your books, your wand, and your school supplies," he explained.

"But, sir, how am I...?" asked the small boy.

"Do not concern yourself, Mr. Potter." Snape removed a wallet from his trouser pocket. He began counting out the appropriate amount for the clothing. "Your relatives should have provided you with new clothes, so, I've decided that, just this once, I'll pay for them."

Harry could see that Snape was firm in his decision, so he put away his money bag, and then held half of the packages his clothing was in until they returned to Diagon Alley. Once there, Snape shrunk all the packages and tucked them into a pocket of Harry's new jeans. Harry was also wearing a new shirt (his only purple one he'd been allowed) and a soft, lightweight jumper that Snape had picked out for him that was beige and dark brown. On his feet were the new trainers and Harry was enjoying the bounce of the new shoes and how good they felt on his feet.

"Are you hungry, Mr. Potter?" Harry simply nodded and Snape led him over to a new looking restaurant.

Harry studied the menu, smiling as he could clearly read all the words. For a moment, that distracted him, but then he remembered he had to eat, so he concentrated on choosing something. As he did so, he thumped the edge of the menu on the table top.

Snape's hand stilled the thumping menu. Harry looked around the side of his menu and gave his teacher an apologetic glance. "Order anything you'd like, Mr. Potter. Don't just order what is inexpensive."

Harry's eyes widened. "Really? Are you sure, sir? I don't eat that much."

"I rather thought you didn't and that's something we're going to work on. Now, order whatever you like."

Harry ordered turkey with gravy and stuffing and cranberry sauce. He also ordered some pumpkin juice, and since they were eating out for dinner, Snape allowed Harry to indulge in the restaurant's specialty cake, a confection called 'Chocolate Bomb'.

Snape ordered the roast beef with Yorkshire pudding and had a small bowl of chocolate chip ice cream for dessert. He drank coffee through the meal since they still had two stops left.

An hour later, just as the sun was vanishing along the horizon, Harry and Snape left the restaurant and headed down the street to Ollivander's. The wizened wandmaker peered at the two wizards and then leaned far over his counter to scowl at Harry.

"Mr. Potter," he drawled. "Don't tell me you dislike the wand that chose you?"

"No! I thought it was great! But... but..." Harry silenced himself as a vision of his beautiful wand splintering beneath his uncle's heavy footstep rose up in the forefront of his mind.

"Oh dear! That is a tragedy!" murmured Ollivander and Harry backed up right into Snape. He wondered if the wandmaker had read his mind.

"Mr. Potter just needs a new wand," snapped Snape. "Could we get on with it?"

Ollivander gave the Potions Master a glare before disappearing into the stacks of wands. When he returned, he held out a grey box to Harry.

"Yew. Twelve inches with a unicorn hair core."

Harry touched the wand lightly. His fingers felt slimey. He pushed the box and the wand away. "Not that one." He grimaced.

Ollivander smiled and disappeared again.

Twenty minutes seem to crawl by at a snail's pace as Harry tried wand after wand. At one point when Ollivander was muttering under his breath, Harry yawned, and swayed slightly on his feet. Snape glowered. Harry had had a very long day.

Finally, Ollivander let out a yelp, possibly of discovery, and nearly ran to his counter. He then slowed and presented the box which was a forest green. He reverently removed the lid.

"Apple wood, Mr. Potter. You may wish to read the lore surrounding the apple tree. Tis not at all as humble as one might think." Just as Harry lifted himself on tiptoes so he could see the wand, Ollivander pulled it away. "Eleven and a half inches with Ashwinder Ash as its



core." He lowered the box down over the counter to Harry's level. "I've never made another like it, Mr. Potter."

Harry peered into the box at the wand which resembled a slightly green tinted, gnarled branch. It was as though it had been broken off its mother tree. Harry picked up the wand and was immediately pleased at how it felt in his hand; as though it always belonged there. He could feel his own magical core reaching towards the Ashwinder Ash and connecting with it. He waved it and shouted in delight as sparks of pure purple burst forth from the tip.

"Ah yes! That's the one, Mr. Potter! The. Very. One!" He leaned further over his counter and Snape was worried that the man might tumble over it. "Mark my words, Mr. Potter, learn what this wand means, and what it is capable of."

"Great things?" Harry realised that in echoing the wandmaker's words from when he'd bought his first wand, he was being rude. "Sorry, sir."

Ollivander shook his head. "Hardly, Mr. Potter, although the possibility of accomplishing great things does exist for every witch and wizard, you will find..." he smiled and his eyes twinkled secretively. "Well, I leave that to you to discover, Mr. Potter."

"Professor, I think this wand is even better than my first one!" Harry, barely hearing what the price was, handed his galleons to Ollivander, and still staring, very happily, at his wand, walked out ahead of Snape.

Harry was supplied with almost everything he needed. Their last stop would be Slug & Jiggers Apothecary since Snape had to order some last minute supplies for Potions class.

He and Harry both were feeling tired and although Harry would be able to return to his dorm to put away all his new things, Snape still had quizzes to grade and Draco's detention to deal with. He'd be lucky if he'd get to bed by 2am this night.

As they entered the somewhat stuffy apothecary, Harry's spirits appeared to lift. His eyes widened as they took in the jars and bins and baskets of ingredients, the shelves of supplies such as cauldrons from the smallest at 2 and three-quarters inches to the

largest which was one that was big enough for Harry to crawl into. One wall had a dazzling display of phials and bottles from utilitarian plain, to delicate, hand-blown glass, or cut crystal.

"Can I just look around, sir?" asked Harry, his eyes shining with anticipation.

Snape was heartened once again by the delight in the boy's eyes. It was very similar to the light he'd often seen in Lily's eyes as children when they would visit this very apothecary for supplies. Lily had always enjoyed Potions, but her genius lay in Charms. Snape secretly hoped that Harry would find a love for Potions that he himself had. He would know on Friday when Harry would finally get to attend his class.

"It is 'may I', Mr. Potter," Snape corrected the boy's grammar. "And yes, you may. Just keep your hands to yourself, and if you have any questions, please wait until I have concluded my business with Mr. Jiggers."

"Okay, sir!" Harry veered off towards the display case that held a variety of rare, preserved, ingredients. The sort of ghastly things that Snape kept purposefully in his office to intimidate the wayward student.

The gross things in the display cabinet were fascinating to Harry, but the odd and enticing scents of various dried ingredients captivated him next. He went over to a wide selection of baskets that held bushels of dried plants, dried livers, hearts, and other dried viscera of various magical and non-magical animals. He examined the hand calligraphed labels that gave the Latin names for everything. Finally, he was drawn to the glittering array of bottles and phials.

"Mr. Potter!" Snape called from the counter.

"Yes, sir?" Harry was just about to touch one rather dazzling crystal phial when he heard Snape's voice. Thinking that the wizard might know what he was about to do, he snatched his hand back and stuffed it into his pocket.

"You need a Potions kit. Go to the front of the shop and pick out one of the Hogwarts First Year Potions kits," direct Snape.

Harry, pleased that he hadn't been seen about to disobey Snape's order of 'keeping his hands to himself', he made his way to the front of the shop where the Potions kits were. He found one, picked it up, and then took it to the front of the shop.

Snape, it seemed to Harry, didn't appear to be aware of him putting the kit on the counter. Harry was about to say something when Snape consulted a piece of parchment and spoke up, "Go and find a #2 iron cauldron and a Stirrers Kit."

"Yes, sir!" Harry stood frozen. He knew where the cauldrons were, but not where to find the stirrers.

Mr. Jiggers spoke up, "#2 cauldrons are on the fourth shelf and you can find the Stirrers Kits on the opposite side of my store, towards the front."

Harry didn't run, but he did move quickly to get the requested items. He found the cauldron quickly enough, but the Stirrer Kit took a few more minutes. When he found them, beautiful glass, crystal, iron, silver, copper, bronze, and five different types of wood all packed in a dragon hide leather case, he plucked one off the shelf and brought them over to his teacher.

"Sir, these are really expensive," said Harry as he handed over the Stirrers Kit. "I didn't see the cheap one that I bought before."

Mr. Jiggers replied before Snape could. "Run out of those, we did. Pretty much all the students buy those for school. S'pose I could order one for you," he said to Snape in a tone that meant he really didn't want to order the cheaper kit if he could sell the more expensive one.

Snape didn't look up from the parchment he was studying. "A good kit of stirrers can last several years if you take care of them, Mr. Potter. I believe you have enough left for them?"

Harry took out his pouch of galleons and looked down into it. "I don't think I have enoug, sir," said Harry looking up at Mr. Jiggers.

"I suppose a slight discount... might be in order?" asked Mr. Jiggers as he looked sideways at the Potions Master. "A fair price, I'll say," hedged the man.

Snape looked up from his parchment and sneered at Jiggers. "A fair price indeed, Mr. Jiggers," he threatened easily.

Mr. Jiggers paled considerably. The Hogwarts contract was a very lucrative one, not to mention the private business that the Potions Master himself brought to Slug & Jiggers Apothecary. He stammered as he spoke, "F-f-fair price... erm... yes. Ah, twenty-five galleons?" The owner gulped audibly. He'd just quoted a ridiculously low price for the expensive kit that was only ten galleons more than the cheap kit."

"That does seem reasonable," nodded Snape. He glanced down at Harry as he folded up his parchment list. "Have you enough, Mr. Potter?"

Harry spilled his remaining galleons, along with sickles and knuts onto the counter. He started to count, but Snape's quick fingers had everything counted in a few, short breaths. Reaching into his own pocket, he took the difference from his purse and added it to Harry's.

Harry saw what his teacher had done and objected, "But, sir..."

"For services to be rendered, Mr. Potter," Snape interrupted. "You may assist me this Sunday by preparing ingredients for some potions I'll be brewing."

"Oh." Harry blinked and smiled. "Okay, sir!" Harry hadn't even had the professor's class, yet, but his teacher was going to allow him to help.

Sept. 7, 1991 - Hogwarts, Evening

Draco wanted to see everything that Harry had gotten, but he had to content himself with only seeing Harry's new wand.

"Mr. Ollivander said I ought to learn about my wand," said Harry as he swished it and produced more purple sparks.

"I bet he's talking about Wand Lore & History by Imelda Sparks," informed Draco. He swished his own wand to produce silvery blue sparks. "It's in the library. It tells you all about the symbolism of the materials used in wand making."

Harry studied Draco's wand for a moment. "What's yours?"

"Hawthorn, ten inches, with unicorn hair. According to Sparks, my wand symbolises strength and purity of the heart. Ollivander said it's 'springy', whatever that means. Mother says that with this wand, my best magic will be Healing magic." One more flourish produced more of the silvery blue sparkles.

"What does your dad say?" asked Harry.

"Father told me that the hawthorn is a very magical tree. It enhances your magic so he said that whatever I chose to do with my magic, it would be powerful, but because of the unicorn hair, the power will be tempered with honor." Draco smiled proudly.

"That's wicked," Harry approved. "I'll see if I can find that book tonight after I put everything away. Want me to walk you to Snape's office?"

Draco scowled at the reminder of his detention. Still staring down at his feet, he asked, "How come you didn't hit me back, Harry?"

Harry shrugged as he folded one of his new shirts. "It ends quicker if I don't fight back," he replied softly.

Draco frowned at his friend. "What ends quicker?"

Harry could see flashes of the few times he had fought back, mostly against Dudley and his friends. They'd only hit him harder, and kicked. It made him sick just thinking of it.

"Harry?" Draco walked over to where his friend stood, frozen, staring at the opposite wall. Fortunately, Harry acknowledged Draco using his name by turning to face him. "Did you get beat up a lot?"

Harry nodded. "By my cousin. He's a lot bigger than me and I learned that if I didn't fight back, then he'd just leave me alone." Harry did not mention that it was different with his uncle. Uncle Vernon didn't ever seem to care whether or not Harry fought back. He just wanted to hurt Harry.

Draco put away his wand by slipping it up his sleeve. He picked up his book bag from beside his bed and slipped his Potions textbook inside. Harry was folding his shirts and putting them into a drawer at the bottom of the wardrobe.

"Harry?" Draco asked softly, sadly.

"Yeah?" Harry's voice echoed his friend's tone.

"Do you hate me for getting mad and hitting you?" Draco's fingers were tight on the straps on the book bag.

Harry turned abruptly. "No! Gosh, no, Draco! You're my friend! I mean, I don't like that you hit me, but you 'pologised already and it's okay. Isn't it?"

Draco smiled shyly. "Yeah. It's okay, Harry." Draco darted through the door of their dorm and Harry let out a sigh of relief. He was glad he hadn't lost his very best and very first friend.

Snape's office wasn't very far from the Slytherin common room. Even so, by the time Draco had walked the short distance, his heart was beating heavily in his chest. He'd only heard about the professor's detentions from some of the older kids that day while Harry and Professor Snape were in Diagon Alley. It sounded terrible.

According to what Draco was told, the professor had a wall of chains where he hung the bad kids from their thumbs. Or, he'd try out his experimental potions on the bad kids so he could see what happened.

"Don't hang about in the corridor, Mr. Malfoy," came Snape's voice from within the office. "I do have other work I'd like to get to tonight."

Draco swallowed and stepped in. "Sorry, sir." He took a moment to look around at the bottles and jars that lined most of Snape's office. In front of him was a large desk upon which there were ink bottles, quills, a few books, and quizzes which were probably from some of his Head of House's classes. Just in front of the large desk was a much smaller student's desk and a bench.

"Sit down, Mr. Malfoy. You're going to be writing a letter." Snape was standing over the desk and it took every ounce of courage that Draco had to move over to the desk and sit down in it.

Draco looked up, up, up at his teacher and did not like the cold, disappointed expression on the man's face. "A l-l-letter, sir?" he asked warily.

"To your father," explained Snape sharply. "In your letter you will tell him of the fight this morning and precisely what precipitated it. You will then detail your punishment, including tonight's detention. Once you are finished, bring it to me." Snape swept to behind his desk and with a flourish of his robes, he seated himself and picked up a quill. "No spelling errors. No messy ink blots. Begin."

Draco stared with a sinking stomach at the blank piece of parchment. After his father had told him to cultivate a strong alliance... no, a friendship with Harry, he had to go and muck the whole thing up by getting mad and getting into a fight. His father was going to kill him. String him up by his toes and skin him...

"I am not hearing any writing, Mr. Malfoy," came Snape's laconic, yet very firm voice.

Draco hurriedly dipped his quill into the ink, and immediately splotched the page. He groaned as the black ink spread and then sank into the page. He really wanted to cry, but he wouldn't. He was a big boy, now. His mother had even said so.

He sniffled.

Snape lifted his head from the second year quiz he was decorating with red ink to glance at the small, pale haired boy in front of him. With a sigh, he spoke, "I do not expect perfection at once, Mr. Malfoy. Write your letter and then we'll go over it."

"Thank you, sir," Draco murmured softly. He wiped his nose with his sleeve, and began to write...

Dear Father,

Professor Snape is making me write this letter to you as part of my detention. I got into a shouting match, and then a fight with Harry. It

was my fault, sir. Harry and I made a mess during a pillow fight last night and Prefect Billock wanted us to clean it up. The House rules say we can't have house elves do work for us, but since I always summon a house elf at home, I just summoned one. Harry tried to remind me of the rules, and I wouldn't listen. We were yelling, at first, and then I got so mad I started hitting him.

I've already apologised to Harry and he says we're still friends, but Professor Snape said I need to apologise to you, too. I know it's very important for our family name to be allied with Harry Potter, and I know you told me to make friends with him and I did. I almost jeopardised that because I got mad and wouldn't admit my fault in the whole thing. I'm sorry for embarrassing the Malfoy name, father.

Professor Snape punished me by making me clean up our dorm and the bathroom without magic. I'm now in detention writing this letter to you. I don't know if anything else is going to be added.

Respectfully yours,  
Draco

Draco gripped his hands tightly behind his back and tried not to fidget in place as the professor read his letter for the third time. Finally, Snape put the letter down and nodded in satisfaction.

"Very good, Mr. Malfoy. I'll send this by post owl tonight." Snape placed his quill upon a glass rest, capped his red ink bottle, and then stood. "Come with me, Mr. Malfoy."

Draco followed his professor into the Potions classroom and to a side area where there was a large sink. On one side of the sink were about a dozen cauldrons in various degrees of filth. Snape handed his Snake a pair of dragon-hide gloves.

"Clean them thoroughly, Mr. Malfoy, and then you are free to return to your common room."

"Yes, sir," Draco sighed heavily. More house elf work and no magic. It wasn't fair. He stepped up to the sink and glared as he turned the faucet for the hot water on. He snatched a cauldron causing three to tumble from the pile into the sink.



"Control. Your. Temper, Mr. Malfoy," Snape warned tightly. Draco looked to his right where Snape stood. "Your temper is precisely what landed you in this mess in the first place. It is a childish affectation and only shows you in a disagreeable, spoiled light. Now, get to work."

Snape left the classroom to return to his office. He left the door between the two rooms open so he could hear the boy working.

At just before 9:30pm, a very weary, rather disheveled looking Slytherin emerged from the Potions classroom into Snape's office. His shoulders drooped as he stood in front of his Head of House's desk.

"May I go now, sir?" Draco asked with a sigh of exhaustion in his voice.

Snape put down his quill and rose from his chair and walked round his desk to where the weary boy stood. Putting a hand on Draco's shoulder, he turned him to face the door and then walked beside him through the office door and down the corridor the short distance to the Slytherin common room.

"Goodnight, Mr. Malfoy," Snape said quietly.

"Goodnight, sir." Draco stepped through the portrait of Salazar Slytherin, leaving his professor behind.

Draco ached all over. And, he was so very tired. All he could think of was his bed, in his dorm, and just falling upon it.

That wasn't to be. Prefect Billock was standing in front of him. A part of Draco wanted to snap at the seventh year, but he was just too tired.

"You can go to bed, Mr. Malfoy, but after you make your apology," said the prefect.

Draco's jaw dropped as he looked upwards at Gordon's face. Another apology?

"To whom?" he demanded far too sharply.

Billock glared and crossed his arms over his chest. "If you recall, Mr. Malfoy, I explained to you this morning that you would owe an apology to Orencia, my intended, for making her wait for me while I had to deal with you."

Draco's head dropped, and if possible, his shoulders drooped even further. Now he remembered. "All right. Where is she?" he asked in resignation.

Billock pointed to a blonde seventh year sitting on the divan in front of the fireplace. "Orencia, Mr. Malfoy is here to apologise." He nudged the boy towards his girlfriend.

"I'm sorry!" snapped Draco and turned away to head back to the dorms. He found himself spun back around so he was facing Orencia.

"This had better be sincere, Mr. Malfoy, or you'll wind up with a points loss, and I can guarantee that's not going to set well with any of your fellow Slytherins." Billock nudged Draco's shoulder none too gently.

Draco scowled at his feet. He was tired and he'd been apologising all evening. Harry was the only one who really deserved an...

"Malfoy!" snapped the prefect.

Draco drew in a deep breath. "I'm sorry for messing up your date with Prefect Billock, Orencia." Inside, he smiled smugly at the charm he'd managed to dredge up through all his exhaustion. His father would be proud.

"Thank you, Draco," she said sweetly, and then gave Billock a withering look. Draco caught the expression and wondered what it meant. He had his answer as Orencia continued, "It really wasn't that big of a deal, Draco, so forget about it. Why don't you go on to bed?"

Draco blushed under Orencia's smile and then turned and swiftly made his way towards the dorms. As he vanished up the stairs, he smirked as he heard Orencia taking Billock down a peg for 'bullying a firstie'.

Draco had only partially learned his lesson for the day.

A/N: Next chapter - Snape helps Harry catch up in Potions and Draco and Harry befriend another child from another House.

To answer a few questions that were PM'd to me: Please remember, this story is AU. I am delving into aspects of the characters that may have had only a blip of attention in Rowlings books, but they were there, and fascinated me, hence this story.

Harry is in Slytherin because in this story he uses more of his Slytherin qualities - it was the way he survived his family. Harry as a survivor is a lot like Snape and I hope I am slowly, but surely getting this across.

As for Hermione, I am delving more into her insecurities and the bullying that engenders.

As for Draco, I think if a friendship between he and Harry had had a chance, he might have been different. He's still a little, arrogant rotter, in some cases, but Harry is going to be his conscience... a bit.

I hope this answers some of the questions I received. Please don't hesitate if you have more.

Lastly, I do not hate Gryffindors. I do not have a vendetta against Ron, and I am not trying to turn Lucius into a "pretty marshmallow". I think a "pretty marshmallow" sounds more like Gilderoy Lockhart. :)

My love to you all! All your reviews are greatly appreciated.

Sept. 8, 1991 - Sunday afternoon

Harry and Draco had spent the morning exploring the castle and avoiding Filch and Mrs. Norris. At noon, they had lunch in the Slytherin common room with their study group so Harry could catch up with the classes he'd missed. After the study group was finished, Harry made his way to Snape's office to help him with his potion brewing.

The door to Snape's office was open, but when Harry peeked in, he didn't see his professor. "Professor Snape?" Harry called out.

"In the classroom, Mr. Potter!" came Snape's voice.

Following the voice, Harry spied the door near Snape's desk that was open. He walked over to it, looked through, and saw the Potions classroom. He still didn't see his teacher, though.

"Sir?"

"In here, Mr. Potter," came Snape's impatient voice.

Harry let out a startled yelp and Snape stepped forth from the ingredients supply room. He spoke in a more calm tone, "My apologies, Mr. Potter. It was not my intention to startle you."

"I'm okay, sir," Harry smiled weakly.

Snape's left eyebrow rose incrementally. "Indeed. Come into the ingredients cabinet, Mr. Potter. I need your assistance as I gather what we will need for today's potions."

Harry followed his teacher and was amazed by the tall, walk-in cabinet. Shelves of ingredients, all alphabetized, rose high above him. A ladder allowed one to reach the taller shelves.

Phials, jars, bottles, crates, even barrels all held a wide variety of ingredients. So many scents mixed together that it was rather pleasant, although stuffy.

Snape handed Harry a basket to hold and then he began quickly removing ingredients from the shelves. He was careful in placing

them into the basket so none of the ingredients in glass broke causing ingredients to mix together.

Finally, he held up a jar that held green fluid with wrinkled objects that looked oddly like squashed human ears.

"Pickled shrivel-figs, Mr. Potter. Rather slippery as Mr. Malfoy unfortunately discovered." He gave Harry a slight smile and Harry grinned back, recalling that it was when Draco slipped on a shrivel-fig that they had met in the infirmary and become friends.

Finally moving back into the classroom, Snape directed Harry over to a cauldron and had him set out the ingredients. "You brought your Potions kit and stirrers?"

Harry smiled and went over to his book bag that he'd placed on a desk. He took out his brand new textbook, the kit and the stirrers. Snape began looking through the Potions kit.

"Hmm. No. I'm afraid these knives won't do," he mused, as though to himself. "That's the problem with these inexpensive kits. They're never quite up to snuff." He held out his hand. "Accio knife set!" An object that appeared to be soft leather rolled up like a scroll zoomed across the room and into Snape's hand. Snape placed the leather scroll in front of Harry. "Open it, Mr. Potter."

Harry untied a short leather tie that was holding the scroll together and then he unfurled it. Neatly placed in small pockets were a variety of knives, awls, and other sharp tools used to prepare ingredients.

"Wow!" Harry's eyes gleamed as much as the instruments sparkled in the torchlight.

"Silver, nickel, copper, bronze, and steel. One of the finest sets of knives for a Potioneer." A glint of a smile lit up Snape's eyes. "I hope you appreciate the gift, Mr. Potter."

Snape had debated the wisdom of purchasing the set of tools for Harry. Showing favouritism to his Snakes was one thing; appearing to show favouritism towards one student could mean trouble. However, whilst in the Apothecary on Saturday he had turned from his business with the owner and watched Harry as he walked

around the shop investigating everything. Such wide-eyed wonder Snape had not seen from any of his students in a very long time. He watched as Harry read labels, sniffed dried herbs, and Snape watched closely as the boy's green eyes catalogued, carefully, everything he saw.

It reminded him, somewhat wistfully, of the first time he not only had the freedom to peruse an apothecary at his leisure, but he'd had a decent amount of money to spend as well.

They were both thirteen, Lily just recently having had her birthday. It was the summer and Severus had run as fast as his growing legs could carry him to the park where he and Lily always met.

Lily was on the same swing Severus had first seen her on, and sourpuss Petunia was nowhere to be seen. Since starting at Hogwarts the two sisters were fast growing in separate worlds. Lily, who loved her older sister unconditionally, was finding the separation hard, and there were so many times Severus found himself just holding his friend as she wept over the growing loss.

Today, though, Lily was reveling in the cool breeze as she rocked back and forth lazily upon the swing.

"Lily!" he shouted, smiling as he sprinted the last few feet.

Lily slipped off the swing and giggled as Severus lifted her in an enthusiastic embrace and spun her around. She hugged her friend back and then he, reluctantly, let her slip from his arms.

"What has you so giddy today, Sev?" she asked.

Severus pulled a small pouch that jingled from his pocket. He thrust the purse at her with a smug smile. "St. Mungo's bought my sample crate of 24 tins of Wasp & Bee Sting Relief Wax. I received payment today and... and Lily," he breathed excitedly, "they want more!"

Lily let out a whoop of joy. "Severus! How wonderful!"

"Mother was so clever, Lily," he spoke softly, but with obvious love and admiration. "The representative from St. Mungo's wanted to come to Spinner's End, but mother told him it would be easier if we

met in Hogsmeade. Do you want to come? Mother said she'd take us to Diagon Alley after and I could spend some of this."

"Oh, but, Sev, you really should have your own vault, now," Lily, ever practical, pointed out.

"Oh, well, yes," he nodded. "I'll do that, too!"

Not yet a Potions Master, but the boy's talent had been recognised in the simple, sting soothing wax he had created. St. Mungo's had been his first, ever, contract, and validation that he truly had talent. Over his school years, he couldn't produce much since he didn't have his own lab except for the shed that his mother had so painstakingly hidden with magic from her own husband, Snape's father.

In potions, Snape had found a way to express himself creatively. Exacting, complicated, but beautiful. Potions were his mastery even before he had completed his apprenticeship at twenty-one. Brewing and creating potions had been his saving grace when he and Lily's friendship had broken apart. Potions had soothed him when he was angry, or afraid, and on the night that he had been summoned by his childhood friend, and made the vow to protect her son, he had returned home, to Spinner's End, and brewed long into the night to calm long dormant emotions.

Lily had loved magic. Never had its beauty tarnished in her eyes as she grew from a precocious eight year old on a playground swing to a young woman with a baby. It was this joy, this wonderment that Snape had seen in the musty apothecary shop in her eleven year old, and it had tugged at his old heart.

Favouritism be damned, he had thought then as he saw the knife set on a shelf behind Mr. Jiggers and added it to his personal order. A teacher only came across such a student once in a lifetime and it was his duty, if not his privilege, to foster and encourage that need to learn.

"Gift?" Harry asked with nervous trepidation as his hand hesitated over the sharp tools. He looked up at his teacher, his smile reflecting his hope that what he'd heard had been correct. "You... you're giving me...?"

Snape's face was threatening to crack into a self-satisfied grin of epic proportion if he didn't squash it down at once. He harrumphed and took a corner of the leather so he could draw the kit away. "If you're not interested, Mr. Potter," he said with the driest voice he could muster.

Any other child would have snatched the threatened gift right out of his fingers. Harry, was not any other child. His green eyes saddened sharply as he cast a mournful glance down at the knives. He slipped his hands behind his back and gripped them tightly.

Snape nearly held his breath, hoping to see... to see what? Just as he was about to relent in his teasing, that Harry was not seeing as a tease, the boy backed away from the set of knives.

"I'm sorry, sir," he mumbled. "They are great, though."

The abject sadness, the hope he'd just so thoughtlessly dashed upon the rocks, tightened his gut into knots. He sighed to himself and released a small, but now tinged with regret, smile at the boy. He grasped Harry by the shoulder and nudged him closer to the table.

"These are a gift, Harry," he said, the apology for his teasing backfiring in his voice. "I know that you will not only appreciate them, but you will treat them well so that they serve you for a long time."

Harry's smile was wary. He raised a hand to touch the soft leather scroll pouch, but stopped. With his gaze, he looked up at his teacher. Again, there was delight, hopefulness, but there was now a silent request for permission.

Snape gave Harry a nod, and as the boy examined each tool with care, inwardly the Potions Master kicked himself for his mistake. He needed to take more care around this child. Harry appeared so strong. Not a bruise showed and he seemed so normal. But, there were cracks in the facade. He could break so easily.

Snape did not want to break Harry.

Sept. 9, 1991 - Monday



With his wand tucked into a neat little holster on his arm, that Professor Snape gave to all his Snakes, Harry hoisted his new book bag with his new textbooks onto his shoulder and followed Draco out of the dorms, through the Slytherin common room, and up to the Great Hall. It would be the first time he'd actually get to eat at the Slytherin table.

As breakfast arrived, Harry noticed that the Slytherin table was not cluttered with all the varied plates of food that the other House tables were piled heavily with. There were extra dishes of fruit but the very sweet pumpkin juice was noticeably absent. In its place were pitchers of ice cold milk, pomegranate, elderberry, raspberry, cranberry, and mango juice. For the older students there was tea, also in a variety of flavours.

Prefect Tara Anglaise noted Harry's curious look and explained, "Professor Snape's really big on proper nutrition. All the other Houses get to eat whatever they want, and they usually choose the fat heavy or sugar heavy dishes. When you're a seventh year, though, you can eat whatever you want." She smiled, and laughed. "Of course, by then, you're so used to eating all the good stuff that it doesn't matter."

Harry didn't mind that his food was nutritious. The fact was, he never got to eat like this at #4 Privet Drive and so, even if it wasn't pancakes with pecans and slathered in butter and syrup, on his plate, it was still a feast.

He, and the other first years, all had bowls of oatmeal that tasted as great as it smelled. They were allowed a pat of butter, and a teaspoon of maple sugar to add, if they wanted. Or, if they didn't care for maple sugar, there was honey and even jam.

Breakfast was rounded out with whole grain toast, fruit, of course, and eggs.

Harry, who really did like his milk with breakfast, decided to try out the pomegranate juice, only because it had a weird name. He dubbed it a favourite right after the first sip. Tart, but sweet.

Draco nudged Harry, jostling his elbow so he spilled some of his juice. A quick wave of Tara's wand as she intoned 'Scourgify' and the spilled juice was gone.

"What?" asked Harry.

"Look!" hissed Draco. He was pointing surreptitiously over at the Gryffindor table.

It took Harry a minute to understand just what it was Draco was pointing at until his gaze settled upon the girl, Hermione Granger. She was small. About the same size as Harry was. And skinny. Her hair was her most notable feature. It was bushy and looked unfortunately uncombed. Harry couldn't help smiling at it. At least he wasn't the only one with bad hair.

Hermione was seated at the furthest end of the Gryffindor table closest to the large doors that led into the Great Hall. No one spoke to her. No one paid her a bit of attention as she ate her grapefruit. In fact, it was almost as though she were being shunned by her own House.

"What's going on with Hermione?" asked Harry, as concern for the girl settled in his belly.

"Snape took points on Friday because she kept trying to answer all the questions," elaborated Draco. "Twenty points. I think the Gryffinbores are still mad at her."

"All of the questions?" Harry observed incredulously.

"Yeah. Snape called her a 'know-it-all' and a 'silly girl'." Draco dug into his eggs before they got cold.

"Doesn't she have any friends in her House?" Harry absently took a bite of his toast, which was very dry since there was nothing on it. He coughed, choking on it, and Draco thumped his back.

Tara turned so she could see what had Harry's intense interest. "That's the Granger girl, isn't it?"

"Yeah," replied Harry. "She seemed really nice in the Infirmary."

"She's bossy," Draco observed.

"Yeahhh, but nice," emphasised Harry.

"I overheard the twins crowing about some prank or something they pulled on her this weekend," tsked Tara. "Poor thing."

Marcus Flint butted into the conversation. "You worried over a Gryffindor Mudblood, Anglaise?" he sneered.

Tara shoved him away from her. "Stuff it, Flint. Everyone knows you're no more a pureblood than Filch is!"

Flint eyed the Prefect dangerously, but he caught sight of her wand tip up the sleeve of her robe. Tara Anglaise was the Slytherin Dueling Champion, and had beaten Marcus Flint last year with a simple Expelliarmus Spell. He was smarter than Crabbe and Goyle, though, so he backed off. Tara just smiled lightly in triumph.

"Tara? Would it be all right for Hermione to join us?" asked Harry.

Tara tapped her chin. "Let me go ask the Professor." She turned and slid gracefully from the bench and both Harry and Draco watched as she approached the staff table.

Snape saw his prefect approaching. When she reached the staff table he inclined his head towards Tara.

"Yes, Prefect?" Snape addressed his student.

"Sir, Mr. Potter and Mr. Malfoy were wondering if they might invite Miss Granger to sit with them at the Slytherin table." A quick darting of her gaze towards the Gryffindor Head of House alerted Tara that her request had been overheard by the sharp hearing of the older witch.

Minerva now listened openly since this concerned one of her own House.

"It's highly unusual," began Snape as he eyed the two first years.

"And inappropriate," added Minerva.

Snape cast the older woman a hard glare. "And what, pray tell, is inappropriate for friends who wish to sit with another, Professor?" asked Snape snidely.

"Two boys and a girl?" Minerva posited, as if her colleague ought to understand.

Snape rolled his eyes. "They're children, Minerva!" he hissed, letting her name slip as he became frustrated with the prim and proper school teacher. "If all three were in your House, I doubt you'd be objecting!"

Minerva's lips thinned as she was caught by the slippery Slytherin. "Breakfast only, Miss Anglaise," Minerva gave an acquiescent nod that held a touch of regalness to it.

"Thank you, professors," Tara spoke graciously and swept away from the staff table.

Together they watched as Tara passed on the good news to Draco and Harry. Harry rose from his place, and quite bravely approached the Gryffindor table. Either he ignored, or was unaware of the wide variety of stares he received as the noise level of the Gryffindors receded. There was puzzlement, curiosity, and outright hostility. Curiosity from the Weasley twins, Fred and George, and hostility, no, hatred from the youngest Weasley. Snape noted the expression on the youngest redhead's face. That one would bear watching.

Snape's attention then shifted to the awkward, skinny, Granger girl. He wasn't at all fond of the child. She had shown she was intelligent and had a love of learning, but couldn't stop her need to show off how smart she was in front of all the other students. He'd heard some of the other teachers marvel at how bright she was, but he was not about to jump on the bandwagon.

Snape had little tolerance for know-it-alls and excessive hand-waving. For now, he was ignoring the girl in class, unless no one else spoke up.

"She's a brilliant child," Minerva's eyes sparkled fondly.

"She's a show-off," he sneered.

"Miss Granger is a Muggle-born child who is only trying to prove herself, Severus. You might see to encouraging her. Taking points away when she has the answers is just... petty," sniffed Minerva.

"Being Muggle-born is not an excuse. The child's incessant need for validation is a threat to all of my other students, Minerva. One class and I'm ready to expel the girl." He sipped at his coffee.

Minerva glared at him. He only gave her a cheeky smirk and she huffed. This was one argument she was not going to win. Snape's gaze went back to the Gryffindor table. He felt a sudden tension in the air. Although it appeared as though he were merely observing, Snape's muscles were taut, ready, just in case.

"Go back to your pit, Snake!" spat the redheaded first year that Snape had made note of, at Harry.

Harry, who had managed to ignore the other Gryffindors up to this point, flinched. The absolute hate that was laced in the boy's tone was like hearing his aunt, or uncle, or even his cousin address him. He paused and the smile he'd approached Hermione with wavered.

"Shut up, Ron!" snapped Hermione as she grabbed her book bag and scooted away from the table.

It was that sharp admonition from Hermione towards the redhead that put Harry back on track. Hermione grabbed his arm and together they marched triumphantly back to the Slytherin table.

Snape was pleased to see his two prefects keeping a sharp eye on the Slytherins that might not appreciate either a Gryffindor, or a Muggle-born at their table. As for Harry and Draco, they allowed the girl to sit between them, making her feel welcome, yet protecting her at the same time. Teddy Nott greeted her, and Blaise Zabini did as well. Pansy Parkinson, though, had an expression on her pug-like face that was as vituperative as the one that still remained on Ron Weasley's.

Breakfast was almost finished when Snape caught Minerva staring somewhat surreptitiously at Harry.

The older woman sighed, "James wouldn't have been at all happy."

Snape bristled, both at the mention of his long, dead rival, and at the implied insult. "As he's dead, he doesn't have much say in the matter, does he?"

Minerva whirled on him, as best as she could in her chair at the staff table, "Severus Snape!" she admonished, her voice almost hissing in its whisper. "I was not implying that James would be unhappy to have Harry in your House! I was trying to say that he would not have been happy to know the circumstances that sent him to Slytherin."

Snape didn't relax his scowl. He was sure there was still some sort of insult in all of that. "What would you know of Harry's circumstances?" he inquired slyly.

It was Minerva's turn to roll her eyes at him. "I am the Deputy Headmistress, Severus. It is my business to know. Frankly, Albus wasn't too happy with Poppy when she shared Mr. Potter's medical record with me, but she was concerned that nothing appeared to have been done about it."

"Something has been done," Snape spoke quietly. He had not known that Poppy would have spoken to Minerva. He recalled that Minerva had referred to the Dursleys as the 'worst sort of Muggles', but then he'd seen the rather brusque shove she'd given Harry at his Sorting.

Snape glanced quickly up and down the table. "Professor, we both have about 45 minutes before classes begin. Might I walk you to your classroom?"

Minerva picked up on the hint that Snape wanted to speak to her a bit more privately. Dabbing her lips with her napkin, she moved away from the table and through the narrow door behind the staff table. Seconds later, Snape was behind her.

Albus glanced up from his morning tea to watch his two professors leaving together, and he frowned slightly before Filius Flitwick captured his attention.

Once the two professors were in a corridor by themselves, Snape began by bluntly pointing out, "I was rather under the impression that you, like Albus, were not at all happy with Mr. Potter's Sorting."

"I'll admit I was shocked, Severus, but I'd never hold it against the boy. After all, Lily continued to hold a great regard for you, despite your troubles in your fifth year," declaimed the Deputy Headmistress.

Snape stopped in mid-step. This was news to him. Lily had nearly severed all ties between them after an incident out by the lake. Thus, when Lily had summoned him to her parents house almost a year before her death, he had been resentful, but nonetheless curious.

"Lily held nothing but contempt for me, Minerva. And I was convenient..."

Minerva held up her hand and fixed his black eyes with her own, steady, brown-eyed gaze. "You know as well as I do that Lily was not one to hold grudges, Severus. Of course, during the remainder of your fifth year, it might have been easy considering you were both still children. After that, it became a matter of self-preservation. Muggle-borns were being targeted, and you know this. A renewed association with you in your sixth year would have been inviting trouble for you both. Lily was wise to remain with James and his friends. They kept her safe, and it kept you safe."

"How... how do you know this?" asked Snape softly.

"I loved Lily, Severus, as if she were my own child. There were so many times when she was unable to speak to her parents because they were Muggles and there was no way for them to understand. She came to me. Lily talked with me." Minerva hesitantly touched his forearm, specifically the one that bore the Dark Mark. "It pained her greatly to lose her best friend, Severus, but she knew, as did I, that if she were to openly forgive you, it could have meant your death."

Snape yanked his arm away as pain, deep pain from years gone past welled up inside of him. He turned sharply away, doing his best to steady his breathing.

"You could have told me!" he snapped with a hiss through a throat that was tight with the renewed pain inside of him.

Minerva bowed her head. "Yes, I should have, Severus, but I truly did not think you wanted to hear it."

"I... found... her!" he said through gritted teeth as he spun to face the older witch. "All this time I thought she died hating me!" He started to stomp away, but Minerva, possessed of strength he didn't expect, grabbed his arm and held him in place.

"Severus... Sev..." still holding tight to his arm, Minerva gently touched his cheek with her palm, "Child, listen to me. I didn't know. I did not know you still held feelings for Lily. How could I? I was neither your Head of House nor your confidant. In our Order meetings I know that you were our spy, but even then I was uncertain of your loyalties. It wasn't until Albus testified for you during the Death Eaters Tribunal that I realised the trust he had in you."

"You could have said... after the trials... all this time..." The hurt in the younger man's voice, as cold as it still was as he tried, desperately, to control his emotions, tore at Minerva's heart.

"At one point the knowledge weighed heavily upon my mind, and I thought to tell you, but I had spoken first to Albus and he suggested that it would be too painful for you to know what was long in the past," she spoke softly, her Scottish brogue coming out with her regret.

"Why?" asked Snape as mentally he worked hard to Occlude his mind against the pain. "It makes no sense for the Headmaster to have told you that. He knows... he..."

The sounds of chattering and laughter in the distance warned them that the children had all been released to their classes. Quickly Snape whispered, "Will you come and have tea? Tonight after dinner?"

She nodded her agreement and then they both parted towards their classrooms.

It was in Transfiguration class that Harry finally got to see why the Gryffindors were so hostile to Hermione. Every single question meant her hand was up in the air faster than anyone else's. Hermione seemed oblivious of the dark looks that were being shot her way.

Minerva tried not to call on Hermione all the time, but halfway through the class, no one else even bothered to try and raise their hand. Hermione was much too quick. Once, when McGonagall didn't call on her fast enough, the girl blurted out the answer. The professor sighed when she took five points from her own House.



"She's a disaster," whispered Draco to Harry when the class was just winding up to end.

"Yeah," he agreed. "We've got to talk to her before she winds up with a detention or gets hurt." His gaze strayed to the redhead who was scowling so darkly at Hermione that Harry wondered if the phrase, 'if looks could kill' had some basis in fact in the Wizarding world.

Sept. 9, 1991 - Monday Evening

Snape's day had been a bad one. Why was it, when anyone had bad news to give him it was always around breakfast time?

Lily had forgiven him? She'd avoided him to keep him safe?

He tossed a pillow into the corner of his old, favourite sofa a bit too strongly and it thumped once, then bounced off and onto the floor. Whipping out his wand, the pillow burst, scattering feathers all over the sofa and floor. Snape sighed in frustration at the mess. Another wave of his wand, and all was clean. A knock came at his door at that moment.

As he expected, there stood Minerva looking as drawn as he felt tired. He invited her into his quarters and showed her to the sofa. Minerva sat down, gratefully, upon the sofa and looked around her colleague's quarters.

Had she never visited him? The suite of rooms that consisted of a small study, a bedroom hidden by a closed door, the modest and cozy living room, a kitchenette, were all quite unexpected by the Head of Gryffindor. Minerva didn't know what she expected of the solemn and often sarcastic, young wizard, but it was not this pleasant chamber.

The living room had been spartanly decorated which allowed for bookshelves that lined almost all the walls. A candle-lit chandelier cast a warm glow over the room from Dripless Spelled wax candles. The fire, held within a wide fireplace, added more light as the flames licked hungrily at cedar logs which gave a welcome scent to the room. The walls were the grey stone of the dungeon, but they were warmed by thick, forest green, pile carpet on the floor.

For a brief moment Minerva watched in surprise as Snape went to the kitchenette to prepare the tea. She rose from the sofa to assist and soon the two colleagues were working in silence to prepare the tea. Minerva watched as Snape poured the heated water into a delicate blue china teapot that had a lid that had been chipped at some point in its history.

"My mother taught me to make good, English tea," volunteered the Potions Master gently. "She would make the tea every evening before I went to bed. I would help her." His finger traced the chip in the lid. "Once... I got angry at my mother." He gently placed the lid on the teapot and then carried the teapot to the tray. He never said why he had gotten angry at his mother.

While Minerva followed Snape back into the living room, she felt somewhat bereft of the ritual of tea making. She pushed that aside as she re-seated herself on the sofa and accepted a cup of the tea.

After several minutes, when it appeared like neither was going to speak, it was Minerva that spoke up. "I am truly sorry, Severus. It never occurred to me to question what Albus told me."

"It seems there are many who appear content to not question him," Snape replied, his voice free of the anger he had held earlier.

Minerva frowned slightly. "You're referring to something else, Severus. What is it?"

Snape gave her a hard look, "The Headmaster will send Harry back to the Dursleys this summer."

Minerva gasped. "He wouldn't! Not after seeing Poppy's report!"

"Blood wards. He told me he would send Harry back with Protection Spells and at my objection, he said if I must, I may go with him, but that Harry would go back."

"That's... that's monstrous! Severus? What is he about? Why would he allow a child to come to such harm?" she asked, completely puzzled and distressed. Again the silence fell and Minerva broke it again, "Will Albus really send Harry back to those monsters?" asked Minerva.

"The Headmaster is of the belief that Lily's own filial magic, her love, is what saved Harry from the Killing Curse. That magic, even though she is a Muggle, is carried by the sister and her son, thus, the Blood Wards that serve to keep Harry safe from those who would mean him harm."

Minerva frowned over her cup. "Blood Wards are more than just blood, Severus. There must be intent as well as the most basic of affections between those who share the blood," she exclaimed.

Snape looked up. "I have not researched Blood Wards so I did not know. There is no love there, Minerva. There couldn't be if Harry's family were so obviously hurting him."

"Does Harry even consider the place home?" she asked Snape.

He shook his head. "I couldn't say. It is not something I thought to ask him."

"Have you yet spoken to Harry about the abuse, Severus?"

Again he shook his head. "I've been too busy since the night of the Sorting Feast to give it much thought. However," he began to amend, "it is my intention to speak to him at some point."

"The sooner the better, Severus." He simply nodded and they both refreshed their tea, falling, for a long moment once more into silence. The flames crackled in the fireplace, but the warmth it had once offered seemed to be seeping away. Minerva shivered.

Snape then broke the silence, "Minerva, does Albus not tell you of his plans?"

The older woman snorted delicately. "Albus trusts me, Severus, but not with his secrets. I did not even know the trust he held you in until..."

Snape nodded sharply. "Until he stood for me before the Wizengamot."

Minerva put down her nearly empty teacup. "I do know that Albus believes He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named will return, but I do not know

why he thinks this other than the fact that but for a bit of ash, his body was never found. You know of nothing?"

"There was... a... prophecy," the wizard said slowly. He closed his eyes as that old memory, his greatest shame, rose up in his mind like a fiend. Opening his eyes halfway, he saw that Minerva's attention was on him completely. "Let me go a bit further back," he sighed softly as he decided that he must tell the witch all of his story.

"I was not yet 18, Minerva, and I did not know of my mother's inheritance. In order for me to earn the mastery I desired, I needed a sponsor. I had no choice but to ask Abraxas Malfoy for help. I expected a loan of some sort, maybe to work for his family in some way. I did not know that I would be selling him my soul." He opened his eyes all the way and looked upon his colleague, his eyes begging for understanding. "I had no choice, Minerva. Without the title of Master there would be no jobs. No one would take me seriously. My little private potions making business had ended when my mother died and the magic hiding her small potions lab ended. My father destroyed it."

Snape put down the teacup and summoned his brandy. After pouring himself a measure, he offered it to Minerva who shook her head. Putting down the decanter of brandy, he sipped at his glass of dark amber liquid allowing it to burn through his old memories and to give him courage to continue.

"The night I took the Dark Mark was, what I thought then, one of the worst mistakes ever I had made. I was terrified and I did the only thing I could think of; I went to Dumbledore." Snape's head dropped and his hair curtained over his face, obscuring it.

Snape didn't realise it at first, but in his highly emotional state he had Apparated to Hogwarts. For a moment he stood there beneath the cold moon, unsure of what to do. Suddenly, he broke into a run up towards the castle. He did not stop running until he reached the gargoyles.

"Butter beer! Fizzing whizbees! Licorice snaps!" Snape tried a dozen more before shouting frantically, "Sherbet lemon!" Still the gargoyles did not move. "Headmaster! Headmaster!" Snape shouted. He fell to his knees feeling that his cries would go unheeded. It was then he

felt hands lifting him. That is, until he felt the rough cloth of his sleeve fall back to his elbow, scraping the injured flesh on his left forearm.

"Severus! What have you done?"

Snape raised his head and stared into the face of Albus Dumbledore. The old wizard had his wrist in a surprisingly strong grip that was bruising the delicate bones beneath the skin. He did not consider the pain more than a bother since his own soul was in pain.

"Headmaster, please...!" begged Snape. He cringed and yanked his wrist from the older wizard's hand as he saw the blue eyes become as hard as ice with disappointment and... disgust?

Dumbledore shook his head sadly. "I can see your fear, Severus, but that is not enough to absolve you. It is not enough for me to believe that you truly understand what it is you have done tonight."

When the Headmaster began to turn away from him, that's when the anger exploded. "Again you ignore me? Disgusted by Snivellus the Slytherin, Dumbledore?" Snape gathered every last shred of his dignity and rose to his feet. "You contemptible, self-righteous, old man! I am a fool for ever having thought I'd find mercy at your feet."

Snape swept away from Dumbledore, his robes billowing defiantly behind him. As for the Headmaster; he had completely turned away before he'd seen the younger wizard depart.

Snape couldn't sit down anymore as Minerva gasped in horror. "He turned you away? You came to him for help, and he turned you away? Ohhh, Severus! If only I'd known..."

The young man was pacing furiously, "I hated him, Minerva. How often had I sat in his office as he praised my mind, my intelligence as he offered me those damn sherbet lemons while those that hurt me were left free to do so again. I left that night determined to hurt him. Only, I failed."

For a long moment he was silent, yet still he paced, though it was slower. "I was not a part of the Dark Lord's Inner Circle. Those of us, fresh from Hogwarts, weren't allowed. For us, before us was still the facade of an enigmatic man who made sense as he warned about

the dangers of Muggles and their encroachment upon our world. I do admit it was something I did worry about. Knowing how my own father had broken my mother angered me and I did not have a positive outlook upon Muggles. I wanted to be a part of that Elite; those men, mostly, who seemed to have the Dark Lord's counsel. I worked hard at my apprenticeship and my diligence paid off as the Dark Lord recognised my talent. He gave me a lab filled with everything I could ever have desired. It wasn't enough, though. I felt, if I were part of that Inner Circle, I'd gain the power I wanted to hurt Dumbledore."

Snape paused in his recitation and his pacing. "And then, a gem dropped into my lap."

The wizard then related how he had been at the Leaky Cauldron and happened to overhear the Headmaster interviewing a candidate for the Divination position. Just as Dumbledore was leaving, and Snape was preparing to dart away before being discovered...

A gust of ancient magic swept over the young man that was crouched just outside the door of one of the small meeting rooms at the Leaky Cauldron. Snape felt fear twist round his heart, and as much as he wished to run and hide like a child, he also felt compelled to remain where he was. And then he heard a trembling, reed thin voice coming through the door, chanting.

"The one with the power to vanquish the Dark Lord approaches...Born to those who have thrice defied him, born as the seventh month dies..."

"Here, you! Filthy little spy!"

Snape cried out as he was rudely picked up by the collar of his robes by Tom, the owner, and unceremoniously dragged across the main dining area and thrown out the door. Snape and Tom exchanged empty threats until the young wizard had gained his feet and ran.

Minerva interrupted her colleague. "You went to Him?"

Snape nodded miserably. "The Dark Lord was... hungry for insight to the future. Bellatrix Lestrange had wheedled herself to his side with those idiotic Tarot cards of her. Mad she is, but she knows how to

read people, and that included the Dark Lord. There have been times she's frightened me more than Him," he grimaced with distaste. "Had I been privy to some insight to the future for myself, I would have known the moment I heard that be-damned prophecy that it had a price that was incalculable."

"Lily and James?" gasped Minerva in horror.

As he slowly nodded, Snape expected, at the least to be shouted at by the older witch. Condemned for having been the instrument that sent death to Lily's door and nearly killed Harry. Or, perhaps she might hex him.

When Minerva stood and walked over to him, Snape could not stop the very slight flinch in his shoulders as Minerva raised her arms. He would not shrink from the older woman's retribution, whatever it might be.

Snape did not expect to be embraced.

For a moment he stiffened, a small boy deep within his psyche still worried that he might be struck. Minerva did not let him go.

"Oh, Severus! My poor, poor child," she whispered sadly. Tears fell from her brown eyes as she recalled Snape telling her just that morning that it was he who had come across Lily's body first. She only held the young man tighter until, with a shuddered exhalation, his body relaxed and his own arms went around her.

Time stopped its inexorable passage as the two adults stood, comforting each other. Teacher, student. Colleagues. Friends. Allies to Harry Potter and any other child that needed them.

When Time caught up once more, the two parted. Minerva, thoughtful, her brow beetled with concern. Snape, embarrassed by his emotions and suffering the beginnings of what promised to be an unforgiving migraine. They both seated themselves. Minerva used a Warming Spell to heat up the tea and then she served them both. Snape was reaching for the brandy but she sent it out of his way and urged him to take the teacup she was offering him.

Minerva sipped her tea before speaking, "So Albus believes Harry to be... to be what?"

"Our Savior," Snape replied flatly.

Minerva would have given the Potions Master another look of horror, but she was mentally too exhausted. She sighed heavily instead. "He's just a little boy." Her lips pursed tautly. "And he intends to send Harry back to those despicable Muggles? It makes no sense! Albus must know that Blood Wards are useless, especially if abuse such as that poor child has faced exists."

Snape turned the conversation in another direction, "Minerva? Do you recall the Squib, Arabella Figg?"

Minerva let out a half-amused snort. "That sweet little woman who never could stop talking about her cats?"

Snape's eyebrow rose. As a cat Animagus he might have guessed that Minerva might have some fond thoughts for the woman. He hadn't, though. "Yes, her. Were you aware that she's been on Privet Drive the whole time Harry was with the Dursleys? Harry tells me that she was his babysitter."

"His babysitter? No. Albus said he had members of the Order looking out for him..." she shook her head in furious resignation. "Another lie I was too willing to believe!" Minerva put down the remains of her tea, unwilling to finish it. "At least I now understand why she was at the meetings. But, Severus, wouldn't she have at least seen something? The Dursleys were not careful about where they... they hit the child. Surely she must have seen bruises?" Minerva was the one to rise from the sofa and to pace slowly, her hands clasped reverently in front of her. "This is all so much to take in, Severus. I have grown so accustomed to obeying Albus without question, that I feel as though my foundation is being shattered."

Snape bowed his head in guilt. He had not meant to distress the woman, but his trust for her had blossomed in leaps and bounds in the last hour over tea, and so he had spoken frankly to her of things he'd thought long dead.

Harry Potter. The Boy-Who-Lived. Albus Dumbledore's Chosen Savior of the Wizarding World. Lily's son. A little boy, abused by his relatives, left to survive by his own wits while the adults who should have helped him were running around with their thumbs up their...



Dark Man.

Yes. He'd made a promise to Lily, but he'd made a vow to Harry the night he'd carried the frail child from those evil Muggles. He should have come sooner, but one can only regret the past, and regrets are but empty guilt. He was here, now, and he would not send a little innocent boy back into the arms of an unloving family.

Snape couldn't do it alone.

Snape considered his pacing colleague (my friend) for a moment, then spoke quietly, as though the walls had ears (which was always a possibility). "There may be someone who can assist me in helping Harry, Minerva. Will you support me? Against Albus?"

Minerva stiffened. She didn't want to go against Albus, but she had seen the reports on Harry Potter's abuse at the hands of his relatives. She also knew more about Blood Wards than the Headmaster did and knew they were a weak excuse, at best. And, Albus had lied to her. Minerva might forgive his secrets, the withholding of information, but the lying was too hard for her to let go. So long poor Severus had suffered, thinking that Lily had died despising him. All this time, Minerva knew that wasn't so and she could have told him.

The wily old witch had one last question, though, before she answered Snape's. "Who is this person you will ask to help you keep Harry safe, Severus?"

For a moment, Snape did not answer. He knew that Minerva would not receive it well, and despite any trust she had in him, she might withdraw it after hearing who he intended to speak to.

Taking a deep breath, he stated carefully, "Lucius Malfoy."

Minerva made no sign of shock, and this worried Snape. Instead, the old witch calmly finished her tea, which had to have been cold by now, and gave him a stern glare; the one he'd often get from her when he was a boy in her class and he'd only had thoughts of getting back at James Potter for a prank played upon him.

"Do you trust Lucius?" she asked tautly.

"I trust in his desire to restore honor to the Malfoy name," Snape replied smoothly. "I trust in Lucius' love for his son and his wife."

"What would you do, Severus, if he tried to harm Harry?"

Snape's gaze became like flint and his voice, when he spoke, was silken, and full of the power that many grown wizards feared, "Lucius knows that I would kill him. And, I would succeed."

Minerva nodded her approval, and with a prim smile, requested another cup of tea.

Sept. 12, 1991 - Thursday

Hermione continued to sit with Draco and Harry at breakfast and it was something for her to look forward to in the morning. This morning, though, she was late and the two boys were waiting impatiently just at the doors to the Great Hall.

Ron Weasley eyed the two Slytherins darkly as he passed by them, but the boy said nothing. When Harry caught sight of Neville Longbottom, he stopped the boy.

Neville, round cheeked, and still carrying baby fat, seemed to be the most genial of all the Gryffindors besides Hermione. Harry had been partnered with Neville in Charms, and although Neville was unusually nervous in the class, he had been pleasant and the two boys had gotten along decently.

"Hey, Neville," Harry greeted the boy. Neville smiled warily as two older Gryffindors walked past and eyed Neville speaking to the two Slytherins. "Have you seen Hermione?"

"She's in the Infirmary," blurted Neville, and then he lowered his voice. "One of her dorm mates put Extra Strength Itching Powder in her bed and she scratched herself something fierce."

Harry glared and Draco looked a bit sick. "That's nasty!" declared Draco. "Who did it?" he demanded.

Neville shrugged. "Don't know, but McGonagall's awful mad and took points from all four girls in her dorm since none of them would confess."

"Thanks, Neville," Harry said politely. Neville nodded and rushed into the Great Hall. "Let's go visit Hermione before flying class," suggested Harry.

"Okay." They went into the Great Hall, and Draco suddenly grinned. "Are you ready to fly today?"

The last few nights Draco had been educating Harry on flying a broomstick and the best game in the wizarding world - Quidditch!

Draco and Harry had about twenty minutes before the Broom Instruction class and so they ran to the Infirmary to visit Hermione. They found the young Gryffindor sitting on one of the beds looking much better than they had expected.

"Hey, Hermione!" greeted Harry. "Are you feeling better?"

She nodded. Harry noted that although she smiled Hermione still looked sad.

"I'm fine," she replied softly. "How did you two find out?"

"Neville," answered Draco. "Extra Strength Itching Powder is awful, Hermione. Do you know who did it?" He had a narrow-eyed look that promised appropriate retribution on her behalf.

Hermione shook her head and was about to pick up her book bag when Harry grabbed it. "No one likes me, so it doesn't really matter."

"One moment, Miss Granger!" The medi-witch bustled out of her office and handed her a small tin. "You may have occasional outbreaks in the next three days, so the Skin Soother Cream will help. You may go, now."

Hermione slipped off the bed and went ahead of the boys. Draco leaned over towards Harry, "We gotta do something, Harry."

Harry simply nodded in reply. He wondered if the Dark Man... er... Professor Snape could help Hermione.

Madame Hooch paraded in front of her first year students standing on the grass with school brooms next to them, like a soldier as she barked out instructions.

"Put your hand over the broom, speak firmly, and order it up!" she blew her whistle which startled Harry, but he only flinched.

There was a chaotic chorus of 'ups' from the children as they ordered, coaxed, or pleaded for their brooms to jump up into their hands.

"Up, you!" demanded Ron Weasley and he was promptly smacked in the face by his broom handle. Draco and several other Slytherins laughed out loud. Harry smirked. Ron glared at all of them, but especially at Harry.

"Up. Up? Up!" Hermione said over and over at her broom. There wasn't even a twitch. She huffed in annoyance.

"Show no fear, Miss Granger. You're in charge, not your broom," Madame Hooch encouraged. "Try again."

While the professor stood in front of her, Hermione pursed her lips together, stared at the broom, and then demanded firmly, "Up!" The broom jumped and snapped neatly up into the palm of her hand.

"Good girl!" praised Madame Hooch.

Madame Hooch worked with another student, from Slytherin, who was also having trouble. While she was busy, Neville had nervously mounted his broom and before anyone could stop him he was up in the air careening about like a drunken man and yelling at the top of his lungs.

Madame Hooch shouted for Neville to come down, but he had no control over his broom as it veered this way and that. Beneath him, the students tried to follow by racing back and forth on the grass like lemmings. Hermione let out a scream as Neville's broom flipped upside-down and he began to fall. Madame Hooch had her wand out in a wink and cast a spell that slowed the boy's fall. Even so, when he hit the ground, he let out a pained moan as his wrist was bent

awkwardly backwards. Madame Hooch ran over to him and knelt down.

"Oh dear! That does look broken." She helped him to his feet and he swayed woozily. "You lot stay put and on the ground!" she ordered as she walked Neville back to the castle.

Everyone watched, murmuring quietly to each other. Draco saw a red spark on the ground where Neville had fallen and ran over to pick up what appeared to be a red, glittering, cricket ball.

"Look at this!" crowed Draco with his prize. He tossed it up in the air.

"It's a Remembrall," said Teddy Nott.

"Draco! That's Neville's!" informed Hermione. "He got it from his Gran this morning in the common room."

"So? It's mine, now," he grinned.

"No it isn't," said Harry. "C'mon, Draco, give it here." Harry held out his hand.

"Let's have some fun Harry!" Draco threw the the Remembrall up into the air. Swiftly, Draco mounted his broom and flew after it. Catching it. He threw it far in front of him.

"Harry!" snapped Hermione. "He's going to break it!"

Harry, annoyed with his friend, mounted his broom, and not even thinking about the fact he'd never flown before, rose up swiftly into the air and after Draco.

"Give it here, Draco!" shouted Harry as he flew almost right up beside the boy. "You'll break it!"

"Remembralls can't break, Harry!" Draco caught the red ball again. "Try to catch it Harry!" He threw it, hard, in front of them both.

Harry was still annoyed, but deep down, he had to admit, this was fun! He sped after the Remembrall, keeping his eye on it, until he got close enough to almost reach out and grab it. At that moment, it

lost forward momentum and dipped down. Harry dipped down, too, and snatched the Remembrall out of the air.

Without realising what he was doing, he threw it so Draco could race after it and catch it. Draco let out a whoop and sent his broom rocketing through the sky towards where Harry had tossed the Remembrall. For several minutes, the two boys played toss and catch with Neville's Remembrall until a familiar, angry voice, using the Sonorous Spell, called them down.

Snape's free period should have been spent grading more quizzes or preparing for his next class. Instead, he'd gone for a walk and much needed fresh air.

Despite the comfort he now had in knowing that Minerva was an ally, he had not slept well last night as images of Lily begging him to protect her son had plagued his dreams. Along with those images, were others of the night he'd taken the Dark Mark, the painful rejection by the one man who once had thought kindly of him, and Voldemort.

His lack of sleep had not reflected well in his classes for the morning, and in his temper he'd taken points and given more detentions than was usual for him. He didn't worry overly much about it since the students in question would merit a true detention for some infraction or another later in the day.

Snape needed to get back to the work that waited for him in his office on his desk. The fresh air had revived him and had helped him to move away from the past and so his footstep was leisurely as he headed back towards the castle. Because of this slow pace, he was witness to the sight of two first years on brooms tossing what appeared to be a red ball between them.

Snape glared in worry. Both children were far too high (damn Hooch for refusing to put a Height Limit Spell on the school training brooms!) and they were also flying about as if they hadn't a care in the world.

Suddenly, the red ball dropped sharply and the two children dove after it. If it were physically possible, Snape's heart leapt up into his throat, twice. First, when he recognised his two Slytherins, Harry and Draco, and second when he was sure they were both going to

smash into the ground. Harry caught the ball, though, threw it, and before Draco could hit the earth, he spun his broom sharply and was after it.

Snape broke into a run, cursing the two dunderheads under his breath. Upon reaching the area where Hooch taught her flying class and seeing her class unattended and her nowhere about, he put his wand to his throat, cast *Sonorous*, and bellowed.

"Mr. Potter! Mr. Malfoy! Get down here before you kill yourselves!"

The entire flying class backed away from the irate teacher. The Slytherins grumbled at their two fellows being caught, and the Gryffindors relished the thought of seeing Snape punish someone from his own House.

Snape canceled the spell and watched (somewhat in appreciation) as both Slytherins landed effortlessly.

Harry and Draco were both flushed from their flying adventure, but Snape was inwardly pleased that they both wiped the grins from their faces as they approached their teacher.

"What in Merlin's teeth is going on here?" he snapped.

Draco found the tips of his boots very interesting. Harry's mouth gaped open several times like a dying fish. The answer, predictably, came from Hermione who broke from the group of students.

"Draco took Neville's Remembrall and Harry was going to go get it, but then they started playing..." Her voice faded at Snape's dark, disapproving scowl.

"I don't believe I asked you, Miss Granger. Ten points for talking out of turn." He pointed sharply at the students behind her. Her cheeks flamed and she turned away, trotting back obediently to the other students.

Snape returned his attention to his two errant Snakes. "One of you had better start talking. Now."

Draco chanced a glance up at his Head of House and shrugged. Snape's scowl got even darker and the small first year shivered a bit. "Playing?" he squeaked.

"Yeah, uhm... well..." Harry mumbled and held the Remembrall out to his professor.

Snape snatched the Remembrall from Harry's hand. "You're both idiots," he drawled dangerously under his breath. "Go stand against the castle wall until I'm ready to deal with you two."

Draco let out a huff and Harry caught the boy by his sleeve and dragged him to the nearby castle where they both, dutifully, put their noses against the grey stone.

"Miss Granger!" Snape summoned the girl.

Hermione looked up and when someone pushed her, she stumbled towards him. "Yes, Professor?" she blurted as she righted herself.

"Where is Madame Hooch?" he demanded.

"Neville lost control of his broom and broke his wrist, so she took him to the Infirmary, sir." She replied as succinctly as she could.

Snape fumed, angry more at Hooch than any of the students. It wasn't their responsibility to monitor themselves when their instructor left.

"Fine!" he snapped after he counted to ten within his mind. "With the exception of Masters Potter and Malfoy, everyone else, line up with your brooms..."

Snape took over the classroom lesson in the hopes that Hooch might return before his free hour was totally up. As it was, she didn't return until just as he dismissed the class a few minutes early.

Harry and Draco had been putting the brooms away and they walked back from the broom shed, heads hanging, as they knew that their Head of House was still angry with them.

Snape, his hands against his hips, glared down at the two boys. "You've shamed your House with your behavior today and I am



greatly displeased," he spoke bluntly. "You have embarrassed me as well by making me discipline the both of you in front of students from another House." He watched with narrowed eyes as Draco scuffed the toe of his boot in the dirt. Harry, on the other hand, was as still as a statue. "Chins up!" he ordered at the tops of their heads. "You are to look at me when I speak to you."

Their heads snapped up. There was defiance in Draco's eyes, but fear in Harry's. "Detention. Friday after dinner," he intoned deeply.

"But we'll miss getting to see the Quidditch tryouts!" protested Draco.

"Then perhaps missing that privilege along with preparing ingredients will remind you both to behave, will it not?" he gave them both a hard glare.

"Yes, sir," said Harry a bit too cowed for Snape's comfort.

"All day? That's not fair!" Draco whined.

"That is what a punishment is, Mr. Malfoy." He gave the boy a dark, satisfied smirk. "I doubt your father will be none too happy to hear that you've already earned another detention. It might even give him cause to visit you."

Draco paled. To Snape's surprise, Harry spoke up, "No! Does Mr. Malfoy have to know, sir?"

"I never hesitate in informing parents of what their children are up to, Mr. Potter. Good and bad." Immediately Snape knew that was a mistake to have revealed that information to Harry. His cheeks became snow white as the colour drained from his face.

His breath hitching painfully, Harry pleaded through his gasps, "Please! Don't tell... them... please... they'll kill... me!"

In a second Snape was down on one knee helping the child to breathe. Draco had knelt, too, and watched his friend with concern. "Mr. Potter! It's all right. You needn't worry about the Dursleys. Breathe, Harry. I know your lungs hurt, but you need to calm yourself." His hand was palm flat against the boy's chest and Harry's own hands were clasped over his.

"Yeah, breathe, Harry," Draco interjected softly. "It's gonna be okay."

Between the two of them, Harry's panic attack passed quickly and he was once again breathing steadily. "Please, sir," Harry whispered so faintly, Snape nearly couldn't understand him. Draco also looked to the older wizard, his grey eyes pleading for his friend, even though he didn't quite understand why Harry was afraid.

Snape rose to his feet. "Do not be concerned, Mr. Potter. You have my word. It will be all right."

Snape urged the two boys onwards to their next class. He sighed heavily. He wished he could have told Harry that the Dursleys would know nothing, but it was an unfortunate fact that he would have to inform them as per school policy.

"What's going on here?" Madame Hooch demanded as she saw her students hurrying toward their last class of the day.

Drawn from his thoughts by the woman's voice, Snape faced Madame Hooch. "It appears that you abandoned your class, Madame," Snape declared snidely.

"I had a student with a broken wrist that needed me, Snape," she replied hotly.

"Indeed? I came across seventeen students that needed you. As you were not here, two of your students decided to play with a Remembrall as they flew, dangerously, upon their brooms. That earned them an evening's detention."

"Gryffindors, Snape?" she sniped smugly.

"Slytherins," he said thinly as he swept by her. "Next time remain with your class and send a student instead, Madame!" Or I'll find a way to make you wash a few cauldrons by hand! He was gone so quickly that the enraged Brooms Instructor didn't have a chance to answer with a barbed retort.

Sept. 13, 1991 - Friday

Finally it was Friday and that meant Potions class. Harry had studied his textbook, quizzed Draco, and looked over the notes he'd taken

last Sunday when he helped his Head of House with his brewing. Harry didn't think he could be more prepared. He hoped he would not disappoint the professor at all.

The class of Gryffindor and Slytherin first years fell silent as the door slammed open to admit Snape. He strode up towards the front of the classroom, waving his wand towards the chalkboard where instructions for a potion appeared.

"Turn to page twenty-seven," he intoned as he whirled to face his class. He listened as books fell open and pages were quickly flipped to page twenty-seven. His eyes scanned over the bent heads, noting more than a few puzzled looks. He then caught Harry's bright eyed gaze. The boy sat eagerly in the front row with Draco and Hermione. Harry managed a quick, shy smile at his teacher. Snape gave the boy a curt nod of approval before other eyes looked up expectantly.

"Today we are brewing a simple Boil Cure Potion. Gather your ingredients and get started," he ordered.

It was a bit of organised chaos as all the students milled up towards the front of the classroom and into the ingredients cabinet. Harry, feeling suddenly overwhelmed by the press of bodies and the claustrophobic feeling that swept through him, stepped backwards a few steps. He swallowed convulsively.

A hand upon his shoulder broke the spell and he looked up over his shoulder at his teacher. Harry took a relieved breath as he saw the assurance in the older man's dark eyes. Harry didn't hesitate to wait until the crowd began to thin and the feeling of impending claustrophobia faded. He then stepped into the cabinet, gathered his ingredients, and hurried back to his cauldron.

"Traitor!" someone hissed under their breath as he passed. Harry looked up to see Ron Weasley glaring at him. Harry looked away and continued on to his desk where he put down his ingredients and got started.

Snape moved smoothly up and down the aisle of two rows of desks as he watched his first years brewing the potion. He had a perpetual scowl upon his face that kept all eyes either upon their textbook or their potion.

"Mr. Weasley, I do hope you're not intending to drop all of those snake fangs into your potion at once," he observed darkly.

"Nooo!" Ron Weasley replied sarcastically as he pulled his fist, full of snake fangs, away from his cauldron.

"Five points, Mr. Weasley. Keep your attitude to yourself and read the instructions!"

Suddenly, there was a hissing and an acrid acidic smell filled the air. Snape spun just in time to see Neville Longbottom's cauldron explode. The boy screamed as some of the botched potion landed on his trousers and shoes. Snape reacted quickly, as did Harry. Harry pulled the other nearby Gryffindors out of the way of the flowing, spreading, caustic mess while Snape vanished Longbottom's trousers and shoes. A second later he had conjured a damp, cool towel that he draped over the boy's pale legs.

"Mr. Weasley!" snapped Snape, "Fetch Madame Pomfrey!" The first year Weasley ran out of the dungeon classroom, sprinting once he was in the corridor for the Infirmary.

"It h-h-h-hurts!" wailed Neville piteously.

"Then maybe you'll remember not to add the porcupine quills before taking the cauldron off the fire!" Snape reprimanded sharply.

Harry heard the hissed admonishment and stared angrily at Snape. His own lips thinned and his features shadowed as he hid his disappointment. Disappointment quickly turned to confusion as Harry then watched as Snape carefully lifted the child away from further spillage and carried him into his office.

Curious, Harry followed as silently as possible and peered in to the office.

Snape balanced the child precariously on one hip as he quickly transfigured a chair into a small sofa. He then carefully placed Longbottom on the sofa and as gently as possible, removed the damp towel to survey the angry, red damage on the boy's legs. Neville let out a whimper.

"I'm sorry, Professor," he sniffed as tears ran down his round cheeks.

Snape conjured a new, freshly damp towel and laid it carefully over the burns on the boy's legs. "You will learn, child, the value of carefully reading your text as the years pass. I doubt this will be the last of such accidents." The man's voice was not cruel, but it was firm.

"I just get n-n-nervo... ow!" Neville cried out as his stirring jarred the towel causing it to abrade his injury.

"Stay still child," hushed Snape. "Do you wish to have permanent scarring?"

Neville just shook his head and stared worriedly at his legs. Snape, sensing that he was being watched, turned to catch Harry peeking halfway from the side of the door.

"Mr. Potter, do you require something?" asked Snape a bit stiffly.

Harry blinked and his mind whirled with possible excuses so his teacher wouldn't accuse him of eavesdropping. "Uhm, the cauldrons, sir? No one's paying attention."

"Ah. Do you recall the Stasis Spell I taught you this Sunday?" Snape inquired.

"Yes, sir, I do."

"Very good. Put all the cauldrons in Stasis, if you would, and direct Madame Pomfrey in here as soon as she arrives."

"Okay, sir!" Harry smiled and gave Neville a look of sympathy. He left the office and went into the classroom. Taking out his wand he began setting all the potions being brewed into Stasis.

Hermione was pouring some powder onto the spill. Draco frowned slightly. "What are you doing, Hermione?"

"It's lye. It'll neutralise the acid until Professor Snape can clean it up." She looked up at Draco. "Unless you know a Cleaning Spell?" Draco shook his head.

A few minutes later, Ron returned with the medi-witch behind him. Harry stepped up, "The professor's in his office with Neville, ma'am."

Poppy nodded at Harry and then went into the office.

"What a dummy!" Draco hissed to Harry. Both boys were surprised to hear the same sentiment also hissed from Ron Weasley who glowered at them.

Harry looked sharply at Draco and Ron, "It's the first time we were brewing! Any one of us could have made that mistake."

"Not Neville," declared Ron with superior knowledge. "He's a stupid, nervous, idiot. I'm not surprised he likes you, Potter."

Harry scowled at the redhead and he was joined, not just by Draco, but by the other Slytherins gathering behind him.

Ron, who was the best in his family at chess, didn't apply the strategy he knew in that game to real life. The insult was out of his mouth before his brain clicked in. "Cowards like cowards!"

Draco pulled out his wand and was halfway through a hex when he felt his wand tug sharply from his hand and fly backwards behind him. He turned, ready to give whomever had taken his wand a piece of his mind, when he saw his angry Head of House holding it.

"Ten points, Mr. Weasley, for not knowing when to shut your mouth, and detention. With Mr. Filch this evening." Draco quailed under the dangerous look his teacher gave him. He knew, without Snape even having to say it, that he'd earned a third detention, too.

With the Longbottom boy in the capable hands of the medi-witch, Snape walked through his Snakes, sharply handed Draco his wand back, and then he walked over to look at the mess on the bench and desk. The greenish-grey spill had turned a rather neon green.

"Who did this?" Snape asked tautly.

For a long moment everything was quiet, then Hermione stepped forward. "I-I did, sir. It's lye."

"Very good, Miss Granger." With a wave of his wand, he vanished the whole mess. "Five points to Gryffindor." He then turned to Harry. "Mr. Potter, for helping to keep my classroom intact, ten points to Slytherin." Snape glided up towards the front of the classroom. "Back to your desks! We still have 43 minutes of class left." The students scrambled for their seats. "Finite Incatatem!" With the Canceling Spell, Snape ended the Stasis Spell that Harry put on all the cauldrons, and class was back in session.

Although no one else blew up a cauldron, Hermione managed to lose all the points she'd earned during the question and answer session Snape held in the last ten minutes of class.

Throughout the questions and answers, Hermione's hand was in the air so much, Harry wondered if the blood had all run out of her fingertips. He was also getting annoyed.

Harry was a little hesitant about raising his hand to answer a question because such a thing usually brought unwanted attention to himself. He had studied, though, and he'd known the answer to at least half of the questions! When he did finally get up the nerve to raise his hand, and it was about Worm Nettle, Hermione, tired of being outright ignored by Snape, blurted out the answer.

"Worm Nettle can only be found in the Netherlands, sir!"

Snape whirled upon the little girl who pressed herself as small as possible down upon her bench. Her gaze didn't flinch from Snape's, though. "Miss Granger!" he hissed, not just annoyed, but angry.

Draco elbowed Harry, "Merlin! She's done it now!"

Harry just gulped and hoped that Snape would make her death quick. And painless. But, he doubted it.

"Have I not warned you, and taken points, for your incessant need to prove yourself better than your year mates?" His voice was soft, but there was a silken undertone that made everyone in the class shudder. "Detention, Miss Granger, and if you speak out again, without being called upon, or if I see that hand of yours in the air again, you'll have a week's worth. Understood?"

Hermione nodded, and Harry sighed at the tears that glittered in her soft, brown eyes.

For the rest of the class, Hermione either sat on her hands, or took copious notes. She ignored the other Gryffindors that were sending dagger-like looks her way and some of the Slytherins that were smirking at her behind Snape's back.

As soon as the class ended, Hermione was up from her bench and running out of the class before anyone else. Draco and Harry had almost been run over by her.

"Think she's going to cry, Harry?" asked Draco as he stuffed his Potions text into his book bag.

"Maybe," he replied. "She really looks upset." The class was empty, but for the professor and his two Slytherins.

Snape, who was using a spell to erase the chalk board, interrupted the raven-haired boy's thoughts, "I suggest you go find your friend, Mr. Potter, and make certain she gets to her next class on time." A last swipe with his wand and the board was clean.

Harry nodded, but Snape couldn't see it. When he turned, Snape noticed that Draco's expression mirrored the one of worry upon Harry's face. He smirked slightly. "Is something on your mind, gentlemen?"

They both nodded. "Flint said you torture Gryffindor firsties. Are you going to hurt Hermione? I think she's really sorry already." Draco said softly.

Snape scowled. He knew his reputation as a teacher was a fearsome one, but Marcus Flint's penchant of scaring his Snakes with outlandish tales of their "Dark Head of House" only became more annoying each year. He hoped the idiot would pass his NEWTs and never venture foot in Hogwarts again.

"Do you think me capable of torturing children, Mr. Malfoy?" Snape asked the child.



It was Harry who replied, though, his voice full of confusion, "You sounded really mean to Neville and he was really hurting. That's torture."

Snape's mouth almost dropped open. Certainly he'd been angry with the boy and he had corrected him, but Harry had seen him in his office with the Longbottom boy, hadn't he?

What was he to say to Harry, though? Snape knew he was not easy on his students, and he did, often, favour his Snakes, to the detriment of Gryffindor House points and an inordinate amount of detentions. He had a general dislike of Gryffindors in his class because they rarely paid him or the instructions in their textbooks any mind. He was always able to discern (without the use of Legilimens) which of his students had studied their text, and which had not.

The moment the boy had opened his book, Snape had known that the child had not once opened his textbook in the intervening week since the last class. Nervous though the child might be, he had little tolerance for any child who wouldn't do their work. It caused accidents. And, he had been angry at the Longbottom boy for causing such a stupid accident when he simply had not paid attention to his textbook.

How could he explain all of this to Harry?

"I do not torture Gryffindors, or any other students, gentlemen. I am strict, exacting, and I hold all students, including my Snakes, to very high standards. Accidents are caused by stupid mistakes, by not studying one's text, or paying attention to warnings printed in the text. Miss Granger will discover that my detentions are no more harsh than detentions I've given to anyone else. As for Mr. Longbottom, he would be best advised to study his textbook and to pay attention or he will cause another accident such as today's."

Draco nodded solemnly, but Harry didn't appear entirely convinced. Harry spoke again, "It was still mean, Professor. Neville's just a little kid and you're big and you're... well..." Harry looked down at his boots for just a moment before looking up again. "You can be kinda scary, you know?"

"Yeah," agreed Draco with a nod. "You are scary, Professor."

This little conversation threatened to turn into something that Snape didn't want to go near. Not with Lily's green eyes staring up at him from her son's face.

"You two are going to be late," he said gruffly as he ushered the two boys towards the door. "Now, go find Miss Granger and get to your next class."

Snape watched for a moment as the two boys sprinted out of the door. For a moment their boots hitting the stone floor of the dungeon echoed against the walls of the dark, torch lit corridors. He closed his door and vanished into his office.

"I'm mean," he snorted at the jars and bottles of ugly, preserved things.

Potions were dangerous. As a teacher he not only had to teach, but he had to make certain that none of his students lost their eyesight, limbs, or even their life in his classes. He was quite proud of the fact that he was the only Potions instructor in the entire history of Hogwarts that had ten years of students with all their limbs intact, and not one death from stupidity.

Horace Slughorn, his teacher and Head of House, whom he replaced, was very lucky that he'd never lost a student. There were injuries a-plenty, though, due to the fact that Slughorn himself never quite paid attention to his students. Snape could name at least ten of Slughorn's students who had left Hogwarts with permanent injuries that could have been prevented, or alleviated, had the man even cared one whit about his students.

Snape was strict for that very reason, he did care. He may not like a great portion of his students, and most Gryffindors were at the top of that list, but he did care enough to be hard enough on them to keep all of them safe.

After gaining his position at Hogwarts, Snape had taken additional nursing classes during the summers so that he could tend to most injuries before Madame Pomfrey was called.

To be honest, he was quite proud of his exemplary record as a teacher at Hogwarts. Of course he was hardly any student's

favourite teacher. And, even at the most opportune times he was hardly pleasant, but he wasn't mean, was he?

Snape, ever the scholar, summoned his dictionary and looked up the word 'mean'. The definitions were many, but he had no doubt that this definition was the one Harry had meant:

mean

adj. mean·er, mean·est

a. unkind.

b. Cruel, spiteful, or malicious.

Snape snapped the heavy tome shut. He was not cruel, spiteful, or malicious... but... unkind?

Perhaps.

The Potions Master, hearing his Ravenclaw/Hufflepuff students pouring into the classroom, slammed the dictionary down upon his office desk.

Was Harry to be his conscience, now?

"Harry!" hissed Draco. "We're going to be late for Charms!"

"We have to find Hermione, though," Harry asserted stubbornly.

"Well, yeah, but..." Draco looked around the deserted corridor. There was only one torch to light it and all the paintings, if they had occupants, were empty. "Where are we?"

Harry stopped and also looked around. He frowned. "What floor is Charms on?"

"Fourth. It's not far from the Infirmary." Draco grimaced as he turned and came face to face with a gargoyle on a pedestal. It had a terrible face with fangs going through its lower lip. "Let's just go. If Hermione doesn't make it to class, we'll look for her before dinner."

Harry was beginning to feel a distinct chill in the silent corridor, so with a nod, he agreed with Draco. The problem was, neither boy had

really paid attention to where they were going, and now neither was certain which way to go.

"There!" pointed Draco. "Maybe we came through that door."

Both boys went over to a rather worn looking old door of plank ironwood held together by rusted bands of iron. Draco grabbed the doorknob and tried to open the door.

"It's locked." Harry sighed and looked away from the door. Draco grinned as he snatched at Harry's sleeve. "I can do this. Watch, Harry!"

Harry leaned close as Draco took out his wand and confidently cast, "Alohomora!"

There was an audible click and with a bit of a smug smile, Draco slipped his wand back into his sleeve, then grasped the doorknob again, and pushed the door open.

A huge head, at least twice the size of either boy's height, swept down and blocked them. Great, ugly, sharp, yellow fangs were bared as a rumbling growl emanated from deep within the horrible beast. A second head, then a third joined the first.

Harry and Draco were frozen for only a second before terrified screams ripped from their throats. They both yanked the door closed and despite his shaking hand, Draco managed to use a locking spell to lock the door. They then both ran, with no care as to what direction they were running, until they thankfully spilled out of the corridor that led to the moving staircases.

Harry grabbed Draco's sleeve, and they both leaped onto the first staircase that was available. Once they were on the fourth floor, they both ran as quickly as possible to the Charms classroom where they skidded into class just as Professor Flitwick was beginning his lecture.

As upset as Hermione had been at Snape's humiliation of her in front of his class, she had bucked up enough courage to make it to Charms. No one in Gryffindor would sit with her, though, so she spent a few minutes of Flitwick's opening lecture about correct pronunciation by herself. Harry and Draco slipped over, in a manner

they thought unobtrusive (across the classroom and crouched down in front of their diminutive professor) and sat on either side of the Gryffindor girl.

Today was the last day for the Wingardium Leviosa spell, but the first day for Harry. He completely botched the pronunciation on the first try and sent his feather rocketing across the room where it poked Pansy Parkinson in the forehead. She glared, he apologised, and Hermione was a bit snooty as she pronounced the spell for Harry.

Draco nudged her in the ribs gently. "We know you know how to say it, Hermione."

She blinked uncomprehendingly at Draco. Harry stepped in and tried to soften the condemnation. "If you're going to help me, Hermione, can you be a bit... uhm... not so..."

"Smug!" Draco finished.

"I'm not smug!" Hermione declared hotly.

"Yes, you are," Draco said firmly, but leaning against her shoulder lightly. "You can be smart without being a show-off, you know."

Hermione was about to strike back verbally, but suddenly she drooped as if she'd been deflated. "They called me a show-off in Primary school, too."

"You don't need to show-off, Hermione," smiled Harry fondly. "You're already brilliant..."

"So that means you shine already!" finished Draco with a triumphant smile.

Hermione smiled and let out a pleased giggle that lifted the hearts of both boys. They both nudged her, squeezing her between them. A warning from their professor ended the giggles and small talk, and although it took him two more times to do it, Harry soon had his feather floating in the air.

Hermione Granger had earned a detention. She'd only ever been stood in the corner at Primary school, but that happened to lots of children, and her school had been a small one.

Detention was different, though. Everyone in Gryffindor was now actively shunning her and a few, mostly led by that awful Ron Weasley, were teasing her terribly. She had spent dinner in the library to avoid their taunts but when she was in the common room of Gryffindor tower, all she heard was how terrible Snape's detentions were to anyone else. Hermione was never more glad to leave the tower at 6:40pm to attend to her detention.

"Hey, Hermione!" called Harry from the corridor entrance to the dungeons.

"Snape said we could escort you," said Draco.

Hermione smiled at the two boys. She couldn't believe they'd befriended her. No matter all the teasing, or the mean glances in Gryffindor Tower, she did have friends.

"Hi," she replied to both.

"You okay?" Harry asked with concern as he noted a touch of red around her eyes.

"You're not still crying are you?" asked Draco, with a bit of an annoyed huff. He didn't tolerate emotional girls very well. Although, he'd only ever been exposed to Pansy Parkinson and she was a simpering, clingy thing that made his skin itch everytime she got near him.

"I'm sorry," she muttered and clamped down on a stupid snuffle. "That Ron Weasley... he's been saying some of the most awful things. And then, Seamus, he actually threatened to feed Crookshanks to the Giant Squid if I lost anymore points."

At the same time that Harry asked, "Who's Crookshanks?" Draco snarled, "I'll feed him to the Grindylows!"

"He's my familiar. Crooks is an orange kneazle, but I'm certain he's got some good old, Muggle alley cat in him," she replied.

Harry took the threat to the familiar more seriously than Draco did. He could recall, far too clearly, how his own, beloved Hedwig, was almost burned up by his uncle. "Will Seamus really hurt Crookshank?"

Hermione shrugged. "I don't know, but just in case, I've been looking for spells I can use to protect him."

"I bet Snape knows some," Draco interjected firmly. "You should ask him."

"B-b-but he hates me!" her anguished look bothered both boys.

"He's just scary," said Draco reassuringly.

"Yeah," agreed Harry. "He doesn't hurt little kids for anything."

"Are you sure about that?" she asked.

Draco frowned at the perceived insult towards his Head of House. "Of course we are! You're a Gryffindor, Hermione. That's gotta mean you have some courage, so just talk to him and tell him what's happening."

She drew in a deep breath just as they stopped outside the door to Snape's office. "Okay. I think I can do this."

Harry patted her back, and she smiled at the door. Draco nudged her gently. "He'll be gruff, but just talk to him, okay?" Hermione nodded. She tentatively knocked and then glanced at her two friends, one on either side of her.

"Come!" Snape's voice ordered and they stepped into the Potions professor's office. He glared at the three of them. "Miss Granger, you'll be cleaning cauldrons. Mr. Malfoy you'll be cleaning underneath the classroom desks. Mr. Potter, you will assist me with inventory. Come along and don't dawdle!"

The three followed their teacher into the classroom where Snape got each of them started on their assigned tasks. "I expect you to do a good job, Mr. Malfoy, or this will be your task tomorrow in the evening as well."

Draco huffed. "That's when Slytherin's new team will practice! We were going to watch it!" He pouted.

One of Snape's eyebrows rose in sham interest. "Pity. You'll have to send your regrets for missing it."

With a glare, Draco grabbed the scrub brush and bucket of soapy water and went up to a desk where he began. Snape then directed Hermione over to the sink of cauldrons. He handed her the dragon-hide gloves, and she began her task. Lastly, he handed Harry a long piece of parchment with a list of tons and tons of ingredients.

The Gryffindor stood at a wide sink, finishing her last cauldron. It was tough work, but it was done the Muggle way and Hermione didn't think it was any worse than cleaning her mother's oven, or her father's grill.

She did feel stiff and a bit sore in her back and legs, but after an hour, Snape emerged from his office, told her to quit, clean up, and to meet him in the office. Harry, who was now helping Draco with the desks, were told they had another hour before detention was finished.

Thankful for the reprieve, Hermione emptied the sink, washed the dragon-hide gloves, shelved the clean cauldrons, and put on her school robes since it had gotten hot. She then went to her teacher's office.

With a nod of his head, Snape indicated that Hermione ought to sit down upon the single chair before his desk. She did so, and he, already sitting, leaned forward with his hands clasped together.

"You are an intelligent child, Miss Granger," he began sonorously. "It is a... pity to watch you beating the other children about the ears with the knowledge you possess."

"Sir?" Hermione asked softly, as she shifted uncomfortably on the hard chair.

"It is unnecessary to show-off in front of the other students in the manner that you do. Your instructors find it neither endearing, nor conducive to a proper learning atmosphere in their classroom." He



stopped and regarded the small Gryffindor. She let out a snuffle, but no tears or sobs escaped.

"I just want to learn, sir," she said softly.

"And learning is a most admirable trait, Miss Granger. However, by not allowing anyone else in the class to answer a question you hurt the entire class. Eventually, they may choose not to even try since you're constantly in their face, ready with the right answer. If the students ignore such valuable class time, do you think they'll be at all enthusiastic about studying for classes?"

Hermione gaped her mouth briefly and let out a gasp. She'd never thought she could be hurting others chances of learning. She just wanted to show her teachers that she had been diligent, that she had studied and was prepared.

"I didn't... I never meant to do that," she whispered.

"You merely wished for your teachers to know that you are a good student," he said, almost gently. Hermione nodded miserably.

"Miss Granger, in order to earn the approval you so desire of your teachers, it is much better to continue your studies, be prepared for all your classes, and then to do well in class and on your exams. We are also here to help you further your education and are not averse to questions regarding your lessons. The library is a truly magical place, but it is not entirely reliable, as you'll soon learn."

This enigmatic statement about future lessons caught Hermione and she wanted to ask more about what he meant, but Snape held up a hand to stop her. "I would be most appreciative, Miss Granger, if you allowed other students to answer questions once in a while. I would also like to caution you, for the last time," his voice became severe and she gulped, "not to speak out when you've not been called upon. That is simply rude behavior and although I cannot speak for your other teachers, it will absolutely no longer be tolerated by me in class."

"I won't do that again, Professor. I'm sorry." Her head bowed and she continued, "I just get... impatient, I guess."

"Indeed," he agreed. "It would be better if you offered your knowledge to your fellow Gryffindors. A study group, possibly? It would benefit them in class."

"I tried," she answered sadly. "I wanted to set up a study group, but everyone made so much noise, and that mean, Ronald Weasley... they're all teasing me, now. I wish I hadn't gotten Sorted into Gryffindor."

Snape sighed at the tear he saw sliding down the girl's cheek. "I cannot say why the Hat chose to Sort you into Gryffindor, Miss Granger, but it would be best to ignore the trials of the situation, and find comfort where it is offered."

"But I can't ignore it, sir!" her head snapped up, and her eyes blazed with a touch of anger, and so much hurt that Snape could almost feel it. "Seamus and Ron threatened Crookshanks!"

Snape froze. He'd seen the overly large, orange cat prowling the grounds around Hogwarts in the late evenings. In fact, no one knew this, but a time or two the cat had appeared in his private lab and had slept while he worked on his potions.

"What... precisely... did Mr. Finnegan and Mr. Weasley say that they would do to your familiar, Miss Granger?"

More anger showed, and she spoke tightly, "Seamus said that he'd 'cut the cat up into bite-sized pieces and feed him to the Giant Squid. Ron said it might be funny to give Crooks a handful of fizzing whizbees and watch what would happen." Hermione watched as a slow burn of anger rose in the dark eyes of her professor. The fingers of his left hand began to drum rhythmically upon the surface of his desk. Hermione held her breath.

Snape had never had a familiar, not when he was a student, nor as an adult because they, like children, could be so easily vulnerable. He doubted that Finnegan would ever be able to catch the cat, who was fast despite his bulk, and would more than likely take a few chunks from the nasty boy before departing. Snape had no reason not to believe that the orange familiar could take care of itself, but a glance towards Miss Granger revealed that she would only worry herself sick over the animal.

"Miss Granger," the breath she'd been holding huffed out, and she nodded to let the Potions professor know she was listening. "Go fetch your familiar and bring him to me. I know a rather good Protection Spell I can put on him to help alleviate any fears you might have."

Hermione smiled, and wiped away one, last, stray tear. "You will?" Snape inclined his head, once. "Thank you, sir! It might take me a bit, since Crooks wanders around a lot."

"Just go and find him, Miss Granger. I'll be here until curfew." Snape dismissed her, and the child happily ran off to find her familiar.

Saturday, Sept. 17, 1991

At breakfast the next morning, Hermione again sat at the Slytherin table in between her two friends. While they ate, Hermione told them about what the Potions professor had done for her kneazle.

"Told you he was just scary," said Draco smugly.

"Yeah, he is, but I guess he's just a strict teacher," she agreed.

The morning mail owls flew in at that moment and letters were deposited for Draco and Hermione.

Hermione opened the more official looking one, and found a short note from her Head of House telling her to meet with her at 2pm. Professor McGonagall also noted that her Potions instructor was already notified that she'd be absent during the class. The other letter was from her mother and she read that quietly until Draco interrupted.

"Harry! You can come to our Winter Ball, right?" asked Draco excitedly.

"What? What ball?" Harry glanced at Hermione and she shrugged. She knew no more about this ball than he did.

"Every year, right when the Winter holidays begin, my parents have this really big party, a Winter Ball. It's really fancy dress, and there isn't a whole lot to do, but if you come, I'm sure we can find something to do." Draco had been looking across Hermione at his

friend, but backed up a little to eye Hermione. "I'll bet you could come, too, Hermione!"

"I don't really have any fancy clothes, Draco," Harry said hesitantly.

"I've got lots! My mother or one of the house elves can make them fit you. So? You'll come?"

Harry shrugged. To be honest, he didn't know where he was supposed to go for Christmas holidays. "I need to talk to Professor Snape, first," he hedged politely.

"Great! He'll probably come, too." Draco smiled happily. "How about you, Hermione?"

"I know my parents were planning a trip to Paris, but it would be kind of fun to go to a ball. Let me write to them and see what they say."

Draco folded the letter from his mother. He was very confident that his friends would come, but just to observe protocol, he wouldn't reply to his mother until he knew for certain that they could come.

Up at the staff table, the eagle owl that had delivered Draco's letter from his mother, also delivered a short note from Lucius to Snape. Snape dabbed at his lips with his napkin and broke the seal on the note. He had put off Lucius' tea invitation since he had just been too busy once school began. He'd also had to deal with the little twist that put the son of two Gryffindors in his House.

He unfolded the note, read it, summoned a quill and parchment, and quickly wrote a reply. The Malfoy owl had been waiting for a reply before leaving so he plucked the note from the Potions professor's fingers and left.

It was two in the afternoon and Hermione was standing outside the closed door of her Head of House's office. She took a breath and then knocked. The door swung open as the tall, thin Minerva McGonagall opened the door to her office.

"Right on time, Miss Granger. Do come in."

Professor McGonagall's office was the complete opposite of Professor Snape's. Snape's office was lit, magically, by torches that

cast the shelves of jars of "preserved things" in eerie shadows. His desk had been the only area well lit, but the desk had remained between student and teacher.

Professor McGonagall's office was decorated, not in the heavy red and golds of Gryffindor but in the tartan plaids, heather and lavender of her family ancestry. She had a large desk, but it was cluttered with essays and tests and textbooks. The professor motioned Hermione over to a plush, tapestried sofa near the fire. Sitting on a small table in front of the sofa was a tea set of English China that was painted with an idyllic, forested scene.

Hermione liked it.

Sitting down near her professor, she accepted the cup of tea that Professor McGonagall handed her. For a few minutes, they both drank the tea, until the professor put her cup down and laid her hands, one over the other, upon her deep, tartan plaid robes.

"I am concerned, Miss Granger, that you are not settling in well to your House," began the older witch.

"I tried, Professor, but..." Hermione hung her head. She wondered if Professor Snape might have said something to her Head of House.

"Your friendship with Mr. Malfoy and Mr. Potter aren't making it any easier, is it?" the witch asked astutely.

Hermione shook her head. "It hasn't helped." She then raised her head, giving the older woman a steely look. "I'm not giving them up, though, Professor!"

"I did not imply that you should, Miss Granger. Gryffindor and Slytherin admittedly do not have a pleasant history of inter-House relations. I am, naturally, worried about how your friendship with two Slytherins will be accepted."

"It isn't," Hermione replied sullenly.

"As I have heard," Minerva said softly. Severus had come to Minerva to let her know about the threat Hermione had received from one of her own House against her familiar. "I would like for you to give your housemates another chance, Miss Granger. If there is

any further trouble, or if you have concerns, I'd like you to come to me." Minerva put down her teacup. "And, I would like for you to go back to sitting at the Gryffindor table at breakfast."

Hermione gave the older witch a look of confusion. "Why?"

"Miss Granger, I think that if you spent more relaxed time with your fellows, they have a better chance of getting to know you, and you them. If this doesn't work, then by all means you may return to the Slytherin table. I only ask that you give this a chance, my dear."

Hermione felt numb inside. Sitting with her friends at breakfast was like a sanctuary to her. Yes, they did sit together in most of their classes, but at breakfast it felt that if she touched base with Harry and Draco, the day would be good. She nodded to her Head of House and put down her teacup.

"Thank you, Professor," she said softly as she bent to pick up her book bag. "I'll try harder, Professor," she said softly, although she would much rather have yelled, or stomped her foot, or even wept.

Minerva rose to her feet, handed the girl a slip of paper, and then smiled, tightly at Hermione. "Just give it time, Miss Granger. The Sorting Hat is never wrong. You're meant to be with us."

Hermione gave the older witch a nod, but with her head bowed, she left the professor's office and headed for her last class of the day.

Just before dinner that evening, Hermione caught Draco and Harry outside of the Great Hall and waved them over to an alcove where they could talk privately.

"I can't sit with you two anymore," Hermione said without any warning.

Draco scowled and Harry blurted, "Why not? Professor Snape said you could!"

"So did McGonagall," interjected Draco.

"Professor McGonagall says she doesn't object to me being friends with you both, but she says I need to give my House mates a

second chance, and she thinks if I sit with you two at breakfast then I'm only making things worse." Hermione swiped angrily at a tear.

"That makes no sense," groused Draco. "And why is it your fault?"

Hermione shrugged, "I guess since it's me that's losing points and getting detention. It sort of makes sense."

"No it doesn't!" declared Draco. "Weasley's lost points, so has Finnegan, and Thomas, and those two older twits of Weasley's, the twins, they keep losing points in Charms. How come nobody's mad at them? How come they're not being shunned? Well?"

Hermione was so astonished at Draco's anger on her behalf that she suddenly hugged him. He let out a yelp, his arms uselessly akimbo. The hug didn't last long and Draco patted her shoulder before stepping away.

"Uhm... yeah, so... yeah," he stuttered. "Don't do that again."

Hermione grinned at him and Draco blushed. Harry smirked. "At least the professor didn't say I couldn't keep you as friends." She sniffled and Harry's face fell as he saw the glimmer of more tears. "I just... I... I hate it there! Nobody likes me and they're all stupid and loud and don't care at all about what's important, like studying and reading. I don't know why the bloody Hat put me there!"

Harry soon had his arms full of bushy-haired, weeping girl. Awkwardly he patted Hermione's back as he tried to get Draco's attention. Draco wasn't looking at Harry and Hermione. He was glaring at a group of fifth and sixth year Gryffindor girls that were passing by.

"Slytherin whore!" snapped one girl, a fifth year.

That shocked Hermione's tears away and she pulled sharply away from Harry. Before either boy could intervene, Hermione had her wand out and had jinxed the rude girl with a face full of boils. The girl screeched at the pain of the boils. Draco outright laughed and Harry just stared at Hermione in shock.

"Miss Granger!"

"Uh oh!" both Harry and Draco exclaimed under their breaths as a very angry Professor McGonagall advanced upon them.

McGonagall gave Hermione a glare before turning to the jinxed fifth year. "Oh dear! Miss Veith, take Miss Broodland to the Infirmary." Once they were gone, McGonagall returned her attention to her reluctant Lion. "Did I not say you were to try harder in making friends, Miss Granger? I am severely disappointed in you."

Hermione was still so angry, and mad at herself for getting in trouble, again, that she couldn't find her voice. Draco spoke up for her. "She called Hermione a whore!"

McGonagall ignored the Slytherin, took a deep breath, and then flatly said, "Detention. With me for a week, Miss Granger. Although the infraction against you was in poor taste, and I will deal with Miss Broodland, your reaction was completely out of line. Students NEVER pull their wand on another student! You've just lost your own House another 50 points! Go to dinner! All of you!" McGonagall strode past them. Draco was scowling worthy of Snape. Harry was frowning, his own anger seething deep down.

"Ten points, gentlemen, for defending a friend," came a silken voice from the shadows. Snape stepped from the darkened corridor that led to the dungeons and looked down impassively at the three first years. "As for you, Miss Granger. I'm rather impressed." Hermione's cheeks coloured. "A seventh year jinx, and you focused it on just the face." A very small smile touched the corner of his lips before vanishing as quickly as it came. "35 points for technique ought to be appropriate."

Snape then ushered the children into the Great Hall. All three were too astonished to speak.

A/N: Next up - Draco and Harry discover something that slobbers worse than Fang and Snape has tea with the Malfoys. Lots of talking a tea drinking. Did you all like it? Do let me know. Thanks! :)



Sept. 21, 1991 - Saturday

The rest of the week Hermione did her best to avoid her House mates; especially Eleanor Broodland. Twice she'd been hexed but she'd dodged each one. A lecture from their Head of House ended the hexing war, but the teasing and pranking did not stop. Hermione was glad of having lunch and dinner to sit with her friends, but breakfast never went well. No one wanted her to sit by them, so she was relegated to the far end of the table where she had to quietly listen to little, snide remarks being made about her. Most of the boys had begun to just ignore her with the exception of Ron Weasley. If the teasing flagged, he was sure to stir it all up and it was the girls who turned the word-play vicious. Her stomach would become so tied up in knots that she hardly felt able to eat anything.

Hermione wasn't the only one. Harry was having problems as well that were making his days difficult. Nightmares, horrific ones that made him scream or fight in his bed until he fell from it, were plaguing his sleep. Draco was suffering, too, from a decrease in sleep and because Harry wouldn't talk about the nightmares to him.

Also suffering was Prefect Billock, who was awakened nearly every night because Draco couldn't wake his friend and would wake him, instead. Once roused, Billock would find that Harry had retreated to the space under his bed. The Prefect sat poised in vigil over Harry while Draco was sent to awaken their Head of House.

When Harry did awaken he would only respond to Snape, seeking comfort in the stoic man's arms. He would weep silently against Snape's chest until he fell back into an exhausted sleep. Snape rarely was able to go back to sleep after tucking the small boy into bed because he would worry about him.

Consequently, despite strong coffee in the morning, Snape's mood wasn't at his best for his classes.

And Harry wouldn't talk to him about the nightmares.

And Draco was turning back into a little brat.

And Orenicia and Prefect Billock had broken up, making everyone's life in Slytherin House miserable because they wouldn't make up.

These concerns were on the mind of the Potions Master when he dressed in his finest black robes, left the castle, and then Apparated to Malfoy Manor for tea on Saturday.

A somewhat distracted house elf escorted him to Narcissa's parlor where the lady of the house greeted him.

Narcissa Malfoy was a regal looking, tall, slim woman who wore her long, blond hair in a soft bun with perfectly styled curls dancing lightly around her face in a random way that was hardly random. The beauty that was Lucius Malfoy's greatest jewel was dressed in a gown of powder blue silk that complemented her ice blue eyes and creamy complexion.

Narcissa greeted Snape warmly and directed him to place his outer cloak upon a gold plated brass coat tree by the parlor door. Snape did so, and then seated himself upon one of the silk upholstered, pine chairs that had a subtle, but clean design of celery green and cream stripes. It matched the rest of the furniture and the entire parlor.

"Lucius regrets being a bit late, but he was called to the Ministry for some last minute business," Narcissa smiled and bade her guest to seat himself. As she poured the tea for them both, she asked, "Do tell me how is Draco getting along, Severus?"

"He is doing quite well in almost all of his classes with the exception of some difficulty in Transfiguration. I am certain he'll work it out with added study," Snape replied.

"Transfiguration was never an easy subject for Lucius, but he did manage an E for his NEWTs. Is my son doing well in your class, Severus?" she inquired.

"He is doing as well as expected," Severus hedged smoothly. In truth, he didn't wish to assess any student so new into the new term.

"I am disappointed that my son is still allowing his temper to get the better of him, Severus." Narcissa was obviously referring to the two detentions Draco had already managed to earn. Draco, of course, had written the first letter, whereas Snape had written the second letter.

"I believe that he and Harry may benefit from a meditation technique that is a foundation to Occlumency that I will be teaching them once the term is settled," he replied quietly.

"That is good to know, Severus. I know how much it has helped Lucius since you taught him." Narcissa did not mention, although they both knew it, Lucius' fair skill with Occlumency saved his life a time or two. She did, however, give the Potions Master a slight, gracious nod in acknowledgement. "Draco seems quite happy with this friendship he has with Harry Potter," said Narcissa, gently changing the subject. "I was very pleased to learn that he had disassociated himself from the sons of Andrew Crabbe and Liam Goyle. I told Lucius that I was worried that the lazy habits and their bullish nature could influence Draco and neither his father nor I want to see his education suffer." Narcissa took a sip of her tea and then turned her gaze fully to him. "I would never have guessed the son of Lily and James Potter would end up in our House, Severus. Remarkable, isn't it?"

Snape nodded. "Has Draco told you much about Mr. Potter?"

Narcissa smiled. "Quite a bit, Severus. I think I know almost everything that Harry has told my son; with the exception of secrets that boys will keep between themselves."

Snape sipped his tea thoughtfully. He wondered how much Harry might have told Draco of his home life. The main concern that had impelled him to accept this invitation to tea.

"Ah, Severus!" Lucius entered at that moment, tossing his outer robe over the back of a chair. He went to Narcissa and chastely kissed her cheek before sitting in a chair opposite Snape and accepting a cup of tea from his wife.

"A difficulty at the Ministry, Lucius?" asked Snape with feigned nonchalance.

"The Minister had another one of his panic attacks," Lucius replied blithely as he seated himself casually in one of the matching chairs.

"Would this be over the Tri-Wizard Tournament?" asked Snape.

Lucius nodded and then took a sip of his tea. "The Minister and that toady of his, Dolores Umbridge are only looking upon the political and media opportunities that would arise with the revival of the Tournament. Fudge believes it would be most prestigious for Hogwarts to be involved, thus forcing Dumbledore to act, for once, with the Minister." He sighed and was quiet for a moment. "However, the Board of Governors are in an uproar over the whole thing due to the danger attached to the Tournament."

"It is unconscionable to put children in such deadly circumstances," murmured Narcissa. "It is enough that we must concern ourselves with past... associates."

"Quite right, my dear. The Minister is not even taking that into consideration and as such he is panicking over the backlash he is receiving not just from the Board, but parents, as well." Lucius sighed, put down his teacup, and elegantly crossed one leg over the other.

Snape merely watched the older wizard choosing to leave the conversation to his friend.

Snape had no doubts about Lucius Malfoy's motives; what he did was for his family, and the honor of the Malfoy name. He had taken Voldemort's Mark, but he, like Snape, had been coerced into it and then left, on his own, to find his way through the miasma.

Lucius was an obedient son, or else. He did as his father commanded; no matter if it came from the Dark Lord, or Abraxas Malfoy. Lucius had a new family to keep safe, and what he did, even if it was distasteful, he did to keep his family alive. Many in the wizarding world did not understand that there were more than just Snape and the Malfoys caught in such a deadly trap. Survival meant that one would be plagued with nightmares in the future.

Snape, with his talent in Potions, and the Malfoys with their money, quickly became part of the Dark Lord's most trusted. They weren't quite part of His elite, Inner Circle, but they were very close.

It wasn't until Abraxas Malfoy's untimely death from Dragon Pox, that the two men had come together. Snape, at great risk to himself, confessed to Lucius of his spying for Dumbledore, and Lucius

revealed that he had plans in place to not only make it impossible for him to return to the Dark Lord's side should he return, but to restore the Malfoy family name and reputation and to keep his family safe.

When the Wizengamot held the Death Eater Tribunal, Lucius had refused to ally himself with Dumbledore. Dumbledore's charm had failed to thaw the aristocrat; he had underestimated the young, intelligent wizard, who was able to provide solid proof that he had been under Imperius and thus innocent.

The Dark Lord often used the Unforgivables against his own followers, and there were times that he either tortured them with the Cruciatus Curse, for his own enjoyment, or put them under the Imperius Curse to get them to do his bidding when they would otherwise turn and run.

Lucius had never tortured or killed a Muggle unless he had been under the Dark Lord's Imperius and his pensieve evidence had been all too horrific, and convincing for the Wizengamot.

Snape, on the other hand, spent three months in Azkaban before Dumbledore gathered the evidence required to free the young man. It was a source of constant irritation over the years for Snape knowing that should Dumbledore choose to do so he would be gone from Hogwarts and back in Azkaban before he could blink.

"From my son's letters, I gather that the fight he and Harry had is no longer a problem," Lucius made it sound as though his mention of the fight Draco and Harry had had over the feathers and the summoned house elf, was of no great concern.

"Those two are quite united over a new cause, Lucius," Snape replied simply. He watched the older wizard and could tell by the briefest of expressions that Draco had not, yet, told his father of his Muggle born friend, Hermione Granger.

Lucius watched as Narcissa poured him a fresh cup of tea and then he leaned forward to take it from her. "I have not heard of this 'new cause', Severus. What is this about?" asked Lucius.

"A young witch of their year. Hermione Granger. She is an extremely bright and intelligent girl, but rather insecure and as a consequence she has a bad habit of needing to answer all the questions in class,

to the point if she is not called upon quickly enough, she will blurt out the answer."

Lucius smirked at the younger wizard. In his final year at Hogwarts he could recall a certain first year Slytherin who had been similarly annoying. Taking another sip, he encouraged Snape to continue.

"Miss Granger was Sorted into Gryffindor and she is not... settling in well there. Her other teachers indulge her bad habits concentrating only on the fact that they are in possession of an intelligent student that desires to learn. Everything." A minor sneer crossed Snape's face for a moment.

"And you do not indulge her?" asked Lucius.

"Although I understand the child's insecurities I take points where I see fit and I do not tolerate any student speaking when not spoken to. Unfortunately for Miss Granger, this has led to a loss of points for Gryffindor, and one detention for the young witch. From me." Snape put down his empty teacup.

Narcissa filled the Potions Master's cup as she spoke, "I take it that the young lady has made no friends in Gryffindor and they are ill-disposed to do so, Severus?"

He nodded and took the freshened teacup she offered. "It became worse after she jinxed Eleanor Broodland, a fifth year Gryffindor, with boils."

Narcissa merely smiled her surprise whereas Lucius bit back an indelicate snort and with a raised voice, and a grin, said, "Did she really?" He shook his head. "A Boil Jinx is impossible, Severus. How could a first year learn a seventh year Boil Jinx ? I was unaware that first years even knew such spells!"

"They don't," smirked Snape. "Many students have learned the Boil Hex in their first year, or even at home. The Boil Jinx is a seventh year level spell. Miss Granger also focused the spell so the boils only appeared on the girl's face. Quite impressive."

"However did she manage it, Severus?" asked Narcissa.

"The child is a voracious reader," explained Snape. "I learned that she's been reading all the textbooks for her classes for the years in advance. I spoke to Filius Flitwick who I believe spoke to her about the dangers of practicing magic beyond what she is being taught."

"And you say that this is a friend of Draco's?" smiled Lucius in satisfaction. "I like her."

"And Harry's," Snape added.

"It is unfortunate that she wasn't Sorted into Slytherin," mused Lucius.

Narcissa spoke delicately, "Do you know the reason why Miss Granger jinxed the other girl so... proficiently?"

"According to the boys, while Harry was trying to comfort a crying Miss Granger, Miss Broodland saw the three friends and called Miss Granger a 'Slytherin whore'."

Narcissa's cup of tea rattled, but Lucius' teacup exploded with his sudden outrage. Narcissa, quite recovered from the vulgar insult, took out her wand and vanished the mess and repaired the broken cup.

"And McGonagall's response?" asked Lucius tightly.

"Minerva did take points from Miss Granger, as she should have, and assigned her a week's worth of detention. She also took points from Miss Broodland for the vulgarity." Snape gave Lucius a small, smug smile. "I couldn't resist and awarded the child 35 points for the jinx. It was quite well done."

"Professor McGonagall was no doubt displeased about that," observed Narcissa.

"Indeed, but it was no matter." Snape and his Gryffindor colleague often argued over points, whether it was a loss or a gain.

Lucius eyed the younger man shrewdly, "Yet you still appear to worry about her, Severus, and she isn't even in our House."

"Minerva has unfortunately burdened Miss Granger with the idea that it is her fault that her House mates dislike her so," Snape shrugged lightly. "Minerva has always believed that all her lions must get along and it is difficult for her to accept that they may unite against one of their own."

"Professor McGonagall comes from a simpler age," Narcissa gently defended the older woman. "It was easier then for a House to unite. We live in difficult times and it's quite evident that all the Houses are suffering."

Lucius nodded in agreement with his wife. "We Slytherins are a wary lot and are accustomed to questioning the motives of all, even those we are allied with. A schism in the House of Gryffindor is like a fatal wound upon an animal."

"They are too black and white and cannot exist in the grey areas," added Snape.

"Light and Dark, Narcissa said softly.

"Voldemort and Dumbledore," Lucius added wryly.

Snape winced at Voldemort's name, but he continued, "As Miss Granger is not in my House, there is little I can do and although, of all the staff, Minerva is the one I best get along with, she and I do disagree. Often."

"Miss Granger at least has Draco and Harry," concluded Narcissa.

Snape nodded. "That, and Minerva at least conceded to allow the girl to eat her meals with her friends. It's been interesting to see how... comfortable Miss Granger appears with some of the other Slytherins."

Lucius caught the underlying implication that there was a reason for only some of the Slytherins accepting Hermione. He pressed this point by asking, "And why wouldn't all of the Slytherins welcome the child, Severus?"

Here Snape paused, studying the cooling surface of his tea. He then glanced over the rim of the teacup at his old friend. "Miss Granger is a Muggle-born."



There was a long silence between both husband and wife as Snape carefully regarded them both.

Abraxas Malfoy had harbored a great hatred for Muggles and the Muggle-born. There had been too many times that he had sickened both young men with vile tales of horrors he had been a part of towards unfortunate Muggles and Muggle-borns.

When Lucius had refused to join his father on one such terrorising raid of a Muggle family that had two wizards who were gaining influence in the Ministry, Abraxas had not hesitated in putting his own son under the Imperious Curse. Snape, working with his Potions Master on his own mastery, had not been a part of it. He had dealt with the aftermath; Lucius, sick to the point of fever, had been so distressed and ashamed, that he could not bear to return to his own family.

It was inevitable that Lucius soon began parroting his father's beliefs and hardened part of his soul against nearly half of the wizarding world. Snape had expected it. It was the only way for Lucius to survive, to keep his family safe. Even so, there were still nights when Lucius would retreat to Snape's home on Spinner's End to weep, to rail, and to sleep without nightmares.

Narcissa Black Malfoy came from a family, all but for her sister Andromeda, and cousin Sirius, that had a heavy prejudice against the Muggles and Muggle-borns. Another sister, Bellatrix Black Lestrange, was a psychotic mad-woman who desired any excuse to hurt someone. Narcissa had managed, with grace, to remain neutral. Snape did not know, but Narcissa comforted her husband as well when his nightmares had him waking with screams.

It was Narcissa who spoke first, "As Miss Granger's parents are Muggles, then, they would not be able to petition for a re-Sorting, would they?"

Snape's eyebrow rose as he took in Narcissa's subtle mien. Her mind was calculating decisively over something. Snape shook his head. "They would be subject to the wards surrounding Hogwarts and an Unplottable Spell that keeps Hogwarts hidden from the Muggle world. It would be impossible for them to initiate such a thing."

Lucius straightened. "Are you aware that it has been done in the past, Severus? The re-Sorting?"

"Truthfully, no, I was not. I've never heard of such a thing," Snape confessed. Both Malfoys had something up their sleeve, and Snape was quietly eager (although neither Narcissa or Lucius could see it) to know what it was.

Lucius was more than amenable to educate the educator; in fact, he was somewhat smug about it. "To a Pureblood family, your House is not just something you have for seven years and then leave behind once your NEWTs are complete. A House is status, a symbol, an ally that can aid one in stepping through the Door of Opportunity. I suppose, it still is, in a way, but there is less emphasis put on what House you were in as a child as it once was. It is no accident that certain Pureblood families are drawn to one House or another. The Weasleys, for example, all Gryffindors as far back as Augustus Weasley in the 17th century on Arthur's side and Elgar Prewitt in the 18th century on Molly's side. As for the Malfoys, we've been Slytherin since the time of the Founders."

Narcissa smiled indulgently at her husband's obvious pride. Snape tried not to scowl. Snape was a half-blood and from his mother's side members of the Prince family didn't start attending Hogwarts until the latter half of the 18th century. They were a scattering of Ravenclaw and Slytherin, with an odd Gryffindor or two.

Lucius went on, "Because of how important a House was to a family, you can imagine the stress it might cause if say a strong Gryffindor family were to find themselves suddenly with a Slytherin. Or, vice versa. A solution was instituted that allowed for the immediate family of the mis-Sorted child to petition for a re-Sorting; hopefully one that was in line with what the Pureblood family desired."

"Sirius Black," Narcissa said so softly that Snape almost hadn't heard her.

Snape turned to Lucius' wife. "Did Sirius' parents ask for a re-Sorting?"

Narcissa nodded. "Aunt Walburga Black was absolutely scandalised by Sirius having been Sorted into Gryffindor. A petition was made,

and granted, but the Sorting Hat was adamant, and refused to put Sirius elsewhere." Narcissa smiled sadly. "I believe, that in Sirius' bid to distance himself from the Black family name that he talked the Hat into Gryffindor and it wasn't the Hat that wouldn't re-Sort him, but Sirius himself."

"As fascinating as that history lesson is," Snape paused and calmed the sneer that had appeared in his silken tones. Any mention of any of the Marauders of his childhood had that effect on him. "I don't see how that would help Miss Granger if her parents are unable to come to the castle."

Narcissa had noted Snape's acerbic tone and gave him an admonishing frown. She then smiled at her husband. "One of the few ideas I rather liked that Headmaster Dumbledore tried to institute was a sponsorship program that paired a Muggle-born child with a Pureblood family."

"It was doomed from the start," stated Lucius. "Prejudice against the Muggle-born was growing, and exploded when the Dark Lord arrived on the scene."

"It was too dangerous," Narcissa interjected firmly. "For Pureblood and Muggle-born." She rose to her feet and laid a hand upon her husband's shoulder. "This may not be the time for the program to be revived, husband, but I do think it would be... diplomatic... for our family to sponsor a Muggle Born child."

Lucius blinked slowly. "We are still in dangerous waters, my dear," Lucius spoke carefully.

"Black and white though it may be, Lucius, if we wish not to be dragged down by your father's sin when the Dark Lord returns, we will need to be allied with more than the Savior of the Wizarding World." Narcissa leaned closer to her husband. "We must protect all the children, my love," she cajoled softly.

Lucius lightly kissed his wife's fingertips. The one good thing his father had allowed, was to permit him to wed a witch that he loved. Over and over again, Narcissa had proved to Lucius her worth; in giving him a healthy son, in easing his pain, and in being an intelligent witch.

"Shall we begin with Miss Granger, dear wife?" Lucius spoke formally, but there was a gentle tease in his voice.

Narcissa smiled graciously, her ice blue eyes warming with the smile. As she stood, a twinkle touched her eyes. "I think I should like indulging a girl." She cast a quick, wicked glance at Lucius, and he blushed outrageously, choking on the sip of tea he'd taken. While he recovered his demeanor, Narcissa nodded to Snape. "I'm pleased you could visit, Severus. You'll have to excuse me, though, as I have some correspondence I must take care of."

Both men stood. Snape gave Narcissa a courtly bow, and Lucius kissed his wife's cheek, delicately. He whispered something in her ear, and she laughed. Once she'd left the parlor, the two wizards resumed their tea.

"Your... beliefs appear to be changing, Lucius," Snape observed smoothly.

Lucius frowned. He put down his tea and summoned his brandy, which he offered to Snape. "I never believed in the wholesale slaughter of Muggles, Severus. To accuse me of that is more than rude, it's thoughtless." His voice held old resentments that weren't all pointed at his younger friend.

Snape agreed to the brandy, and Lucius poured them each a half snifter full. Snape drank a portion of the brandy that he knew would have cost him at least half a year's salary. It tasted like it. "We both believed that our worlds should remain separate, Lucius," Snape persisted. "How we chose to voice that belief was our downfall."

Lucius glared at Snape as he perceived insult where there was none. He knew of Snape's Muggle father and he also knew of the grief the drunkard had caused the younger man.

Lucius had been in his seventh year when he'd met the scrawny, poor boy whom many in Slytherin viewed with distaste. Severus Snape was not from a wealthy family, although, it was known that his mother, Eileen Prince had come from wealth, and pureblood. Snape's mother, to nearly her entire family, had defiled herself by falling in love with a Muggle.

Lucius hadn't thought much of the skinny boy. Things were changing in the wizarding world and as a wealthy pureblood, engaged to the daughter of the high ranking Black family, his position in society and politics was secure.

Lord Voldemort, as he was known then, was simply a powerful wizard who preached the complete severing of the Wizarding world from the Muggle world. As Lucius was not a part of the Inner Circle as his father was, he had no clue that Voldemort desired the annihilation of all Muggles and that his hatred of them was so acute, that it had been poisoning his mind for years. Voldemort was going mad and intended to take his followers along with his madness.

To Snape, Lucius Malfoy was an arrogant, snobbish aristocrat who neither deserved his time nor attention. Content with his books and his potions, Snape never gave the man a second thought. Not until they discovered each other in the library one evening.

Lucius Malfoy appeared to be a charming, wealthy, and spoiled wizard, but that did not mean he was without intelligence. Lucius had long held a fascination, not for the Dark Arts, but the Old Magic that had fallen into disuse over the centuries in favor of the more "spectacular" magic.

When Snape was researching the origins of a potion, he was a bit surprised to find the supposed spoiled Malfoy Prince deep in his own research. Lucius had nearly taken over an entire table in the library and was almost hidden by the books, parchment, quill, and ink he had at hand. Lucius was not aware of the first year boy's arrival until he sensed someone staring at him. When he looked up, his gaze was caught by the unwavering gaze of fathomless black eyes. Those eyes unnerved him. They looked like they belonged to a man three times the boy's age.

"Have I taken your study space, Snape?" drawled Lucius, teasingly.

Snape blinked once, "Not at all. I was just surprised to see you in the library, much less studying."

Lucius watched as the eyes of the boy stole over his books and he smirked. "Not the scholarly type, am I? Maybe if I didn't wash my hair, or broke my nose, hm?"

Snape scowled darkly and drew back like a turtle behind the curtains of his unfortunately oily hair. He did not deign to answer, and was contemplating leaving, but he had read the titles of some of Malfoy's books and he was intrigued.

"Oh stop that!" chided Lucius with a slight smile. "You really are too sensitive, Snape. And, I know the Marauders broke your nose, so don't be so shy about it." Lucius used his wand to pull a chair closer. "Sit down, Snape."

The skinny boy hesitated, then did so. "How do you know they broke it?" asked Snape.

"Cissy was in the Infirmary visiting Annelise Moss when you came in. Seems Madame Pomfrey made quite a fuss and was rather disgusted when the Headmaster chuckled at the 'prank'." Lucius leaned forward, his eyes clearly upon Snape's poor broken nose. "It's been broken before, hasn't it? There's only so many times the fragile bones and cartilage in a nose can be magically repaired."

"You sound like a Healer," accused Snape.

"Anatomy was a fascinating subject for a time and I indulged myself in quite a few books that had Healing magic in them," elaborated Lucius. "Were you aware that the Healing Magic that a witch or wizard learns is still one of the oldest magics we use? Hippocrates invented many spells including the practice of drawing upon the elements for help in strengthening spells that once drew directly upon the magical core of the injured."

"I didn't know that," said Snape. "Is that why you're reading about Elemental Magic?"

"It's really quite brilliant," smiled Lucius, all teasing gone from his voice as he shoved one book over to the smaller boy. "Baggins History on Earth Magic. I think it must be the definitive work on that particular Element."

Snape opened the book and found it to be handwritten, not typeset. It was rather a beautiful book that the author had illustrated with quaint drawings of animals, landscapes, and images of magical people. He then realised that the book was written in a language he couldn't read.

"You can read this?" asked Snape incredulously.

Lucius leaned forward and tapped the book with his wand, "Reddo mortuus lingua!"

Snape watched as the odd letters shifted until they morphed into words he could read. "Wicked!"

"It lasts about an hour, unfortunately," sighed Lucius. "I've been thinking that if I draw a particular rune instead of just tapping my wand against the text, I can make it last longer."

"You've taken Ancient Runes?" asked Snape. His perception of the spoiled aristocrat was changing rapidly.

"I did. Professor Fehring is always right, despite being wrong at times, though, so I'm better off studying on my own. I think Rune magic needs to be incorporated more into serious magic," commented Lucius.

"My mother used Rune magic with Potions," stated Snape. "I was hoping I'd learn more of that here, but Slughorn seems to prefer the more modern aspects of potion making."

"Slughorn's an idiot," declared Lucius with a sneer. "Rune magic is an old, powerful magic and your mother's smart to teach it to you, Snape."

Snape shook his head woefully. "It is far too risky for my mother to teach me runes."

Lucius frowned. "And why would that be?"

Snape stared up at the aristocrat warily. He would not be duped into giving the older boy ammunition that could be used against him. When he saw the earnestness in the older boy's question, he spoke softly, "My father has forbidden it. He is... he is..."

"Muggle," stated Lucius. "I know, Snape. From what I've been told, he's a drunk, too."

Snape's anger flared and Lucius shook his head. "The truth hurts, Snape, but we must accept it and move on." Snape gave the older boy a puzzled glance. "I can teach you, then, Snape. At least until your fifth year when you can take Ancient Runes."

Snape looked up abruptly into the grey eyes of the Malfoy heir. He said nothing, but Lucius smiled as he could see the gratitude in the young boy's dark eyes. He then smirked, "But first, we need to find a good potion to take care of that hair of yours!"

Snape smirked and with a sharp toss of his head, moved a portion of his hair out of his face.

"I meant," soothed Snape, "that we chose to allow others to think for us when we knew better."

Lucius nodded. "Too true. Had I known my father was as mad as the Dark Lord..."

"You had better not be preparing an apology, or repeating an old regret, Lucius," warned Snape. "We spoke of this years ago. What's done is done. All we can do now is make certain that when He does return that He's made the biggest mistake of His existence."

Both men touched the Dark Marks that had been burned into their forearms by the cruel hand of the Dark Lord himself.

"You still worry that Voldemort will return?" asked Lucius warily.

Snape scowled at the older wizard. "As do you, Lucius. It wasn't that long ago that you woke feeling the same burn that I did." Lucius did not reply, retreating to the remainder of his brandy. Snape spoke angrily, "As long as the old man believes it, I will worry, Lucius. I have long held the belief that there was more to that damned prophecy than what I overheard."

"You don't believe in prophecies!" scoffed Lucius.

"I certainly do not. Unfortunately, there are wizards that do and it is them I am concerned with." Without asking, Snape summoned the brandy and refilled his glass.



"And their belief was more than enough to damage lives, wasn't it, Severus?" Lucius' look was calculating, studying his friend's reaction since Snape rarely spoke of Lily, and certainly never mentioned her death.

Snape eyed his friend narrowly as his lips thinned tightly. His voice was as taut as the emotions he'd beaten back so long ago, "More than enough," he agreed. "But I have the feeling, that if I don't do something, that prophecy will be to the ruin of Harry Potter, as well."

"Ahhh," mused Lucius knowingly. "And how might that be, Severus?"

Snape paused a moment. He had come with the intention of asking a favor of Lucius, but a cautious nature borne out of habit and childhood experience kept the Potions Master from being completely open. Snape was uneasy about being beholden to Malfoy senior. Only Abraxas' untimely death had allowed Snape the freedom he desired to ask for help from Albus Dumbledore. One bond had broken, only to be replaced by one more difficult to bear.

For now, he would only speak of Potter. He would not mention the artifact that Dumbledore had brought into the castle. Not yet, at least.

"As you know, Potter did not make it on time to Hogwarts."

Lucius nodded. "An accident, you said," as he recalled the afternoon he'd gone to visit his son and found him playing with Harry Potter in the Infirmary. "Am I to believe it was something more?"

"It was, and is," nodded Snape. "Dumbledore placed the child with the family of his aunt. Petunia was Lily's older sister and even before the mention of magic, Petunia was not always... kind... to her youngest sister. Once Petunia learned that Lily was a witch, any bond the two sisters might have been able to forge, was lost."

"The aunt was not pleased to have the responsibility of her sister's magical offspring," deduced Lucius.

Snape's mouth was grim. "She was not. Petunia, her husband Vernon, and son, Dudley, have abused the boy for years." Now it was Lucius' turn to look grim. He poured each of them another brandy as Snape continued, "I was charged by Dumbledore to find

out why the boy didn't make it to school. What I found was... deplorable. Potter had been beaten and bloodied and shoved into a cupboard. Pomfrey's diagnostic showed older beatings, and broken bones, and severe, ongoing, malnutrition."

"Potter did appear quite small when I saw him."

"He's flesh and sinew!" snapped Snape. He took a long sip of the brandy and then a deep breath. "Foolishly, I had expected Dumbledore to do the right thing by the boy when this school term is completed and to find him a new home. A proper, wizarding home. However, that barmy old coot is going to send Harry back! He claims that the Blood Wards are of utmost importance!" he spat.

Lucius noted, shrewdly, Snape's unintended use of the child's first name. "I'm not that well-versed in Blood Wards," Lucius interjected.

"I spoke with Minerva who knows a bit more about Blood Wards and according to what she said, and I was able to verify this with some further research, unless the person the Blood Wards are protecting feels the place is 'home' and that there is love, they are useless."

"They are certainly useless against the very same Muggles who are supposed to be protecting the boy," agreed Lucius.

"Indeed," Snape nodded with a scowl. "Harry's uncle burned all his school items and would have killed the child's owl, as well, but she is a smart bird and escaped," added Snape, still not entirely aware that he'd stopped referring to Harry by his last name.

"What would you have me do, Severus?" Lucius asked benevolently.

Snape stared at the older wizard. "Harry must not return to those relatives, Lucius. My hands are tied, though. If I try to go against Dumbledore, he may choose to send me straight back to Azkaban."

Lucius waved that worry off. "He can do no such thing..."

Snape angrily interrupted Lucius, "Dumbledore has evidence...!"

"Which is inadmissible after Dumbledore gave evidence on your behalf!" Lucius declared loudly. "Our judicial system leaves much to be desired, Severus, and is, most certainly, rather flawed in many

places, but this I do know; once Dumbledore has given evidence and testified upon your behalf, he cannot go back on that testimony and evidence without implicating himself in your crimes. Or, any crimes you might have committed since your exoneration. Have you been criminal?" asked Lucius with a slight taunt to his voice.

"Of course not!" snapped the Potions Master in irritation. He slumped in his chair and finished his brandy in one gulp. There were many things he knew, but the law, the judicial system of the Wizarding world was not one of them. Among the many things that Lucius had made a study of, he did know the judicial system. He would not have been able to escape incarceration at Azkaban without such knowledge. Politics, the law, and diplomacy; these were the disciplines that Abraxas Malfoy had drilled into his son's head.

It had never occurred to Snape that Dumbledore had sealed his own fate the day he gave evidence and testimony as to Snape's innocence, and his own place in the war against Voldemort as a spy.

"Then, I am no longer obligated to Dumbledore?" asked Snape in disbelief.

"No more than any of his other employees are," shrugged Lucius. "Of course, if an employer is perpetuating and covering up the abuse of a magical child by Muggles, he is obligated to report such behaviour."

"Wouldn't that employee's job be in jeopardy?" asked Snape.

"Only if there weren't enough evidence to support the employees' assertions. I would counsel anyone asking my advice to wait and to be vigilant. An employer that risks the life of one child, may be risking the lives of others. Is he?" Lucius' tone of voice was quiet, but the look in his grey eyes was hard, and demanding.

Snape was a bit chilled by that look. He knew of the artifact sitting within the bowels of the castle that he and the others had helped the Headmaster to protect. They had all voiced their concerns and had been 'happily' told 'not to worry'. Had Lucius somehow made the connection between the robbery at Gringotts to... no. He couldn't have.

Lucius poured them each a last, small measure of brandy before closing it and replacing it upon the table. "Through some discrete inquiries, I discovered that the vault that was robbed belonged to Nicholas Flamel. It is interesting to note, that Flamel has not visited his own vault in over five centuries."

"Flamel hasn't been seen by the wizarding world in five centuries," stated Snape.

"Indeed, that is true, Severus." Lucius gave the younger man an insincere smile. "I also discovered that in the last year, Albus Dumbledore was made the legal custodian of that vault. And then, it was robbed. Curious, isn't it?"

"Curious, yes," Snape echoed cautiously.

Lucius finished the last of his brandy and vanished the snifter to the kitchen for cleaning. He leaned forward and pinned Snape with his gaze, "What did Dumbledore bring to Hogwarts, Severus? What foolish plan has that old coot bullied his employees into helping him keep secret? And why, why have they said nothing?"

Snape rarely squirmed under anyone's scrutiny these days. He knew his magic was exceptional, and he also knew that he intimidated, and could frighten, the most diabolical of Death Eaters. There were a few times Lucius felt intimidated by Snape, but it was no more often than those times Lucius turned the tables and intimidated him.

Lucius might not know what exactly Dumbledore had brought to the castle, but he knew that it had belonged to Nicholas Flamel, the ancient alchemist, and therefore Lucius assumed it was dangerous. That was more knowledge than Snape himself had of the artifact.

Snape's fingers drummed nervously on the arm of his chair as he composed his ruffled emotions. Once they were back in place, the drumming of his fingers stopped and he returned Lucius gaze with one of his own. His depthless, dark eyes gave away nothing. For a very brief moment, Lucius wondered if he had made too many assumptions. He did not give away his thoughts, though, and waited until Snape spoke.

"We do not know what it is. Until you said so, I was not even aware that the vault supposedly robbed belonged to Flamel. Dumbledore has made assurances that the object itself is not a danger to anyone, and he enlisted our help to protect it." At Lucius' perceived objection, Snape held up his hand. "All of us voiced our objections in order to get the Headmaster to tell us his plans. The most I have been able to... speculate... is that Dumbledore suspects that one of us desires the object."

Lucius blinked in surprise. "You?"

Snape irritably shook his head. "No. The Headmaster has twice reminded me of my obligation to Lily, and in no uncertain terms, when the need arises, he reminds me of my debt to him." Snape's expression soured at the memory of that old reminder.

Of the five that the Headmaster had enlisted to help protect The Artifact (as Flitwick had dubbed it) Snape had been the most vocal in his objection of even allowing the artifact in the school.

"You've had us construct a puzzler's nightmare, Headmaster, for an unknown artifact..."

Albus interrupted as he cleaned his spectacles. "There is no need to tell you what it is, Severus."

"That is not my concern!" snapped Snape. "It is clear to me that you've brought an artifact into the school that might be a danger to the children! How do you expect us to keep whoever it is from stealing the artifact and protecting a school full of children?"

"There is no danger, Severus," the Headmaster spoke coolly. "It is well protected, and even if someone should try to steal the artifact and make it through all the obstacles, they still will not be able to possess it."

Snape's gaze darkened at the tranquil expression on the Headmaster's face. His watery blue eyes twinkled with assured madness. Stiffening his spine and his resolution, Snape spoke, "And what of the children, Headmaster? It would take a powerful wizard to break through all of our puzzles. You're putting the children at risk!"

The twinkle in Dumbledore's eyes vanished, and for the briefest of moments, Snape wondered if he'd gone too far in his chastisement of his employer. "We shall speak no more of this, my boy. As I trust in you to keep Harry Potter safe, I expect you to have trust in me to keep the school safe."

With a shuffling of the papers on his desk, Dumbledore dismissed Snape. The Potions Master rose to his feet, drawing the volume of his robes close around his person. Without a look at the Headmaster, he strode across the office to the door. Just as he opened it, Dumbledore stopped him.

"Severus?" Reluctantly Snape turned to regard the old wizard. The twinkle was most certainly gone, and there was a hard edge to the old wizard's expression that spoke of his years, and his power. Snape's shoulders slumped a tiny bit. "Do not forget, my boy, I trust you. Implicitly."

As it had always been for him, Albus Dumbledore's declaration of trust was not the assurance of confidence that others heard when the Headmaster used that phrase. For Snape, it was an uncomfortable reminder that he had traded one master for another.

Now that he knew Dumbledore had no hold over him, especially legally, it sickened him.

Lucius watched as Snape's sallow colouring dropped so quickly to white, he was immediately concerned for the young man's health. Practically leaping to his feet he caught the younger wizard by his upper arms and prevented him from slipping, bonelessly, off the chair in an undignified heap upon the floor. Intuitively diagnosing the problem, the elder Malfoy summoned a Calming Potion and helped Snape drink it down.

As a warmer cast washed the Potions Master's cheeks, Snape gritted his teeth before leaning forward and catching his woozy head in his hands.

"That... bas... he lied to me!" groaned Snape. He raised his head and Lucius was pleased to see the return of his imperiously cool friend.

"I know you shall keep up the charade, Severus. And never let your Occlumency shields down around him. I shall make inquiries on behalf of Mr. Potter. He will not return to those Muggles.

Snape nodded sharply in gratitude to his friend. He knew, of course, that he must remain Dumbledore's 'servant' until Harry's safety was assured.

"I must ask again, though, Severus. Your answer, although concise, was not the one I was seeking. What do you wish me to do... for you?" Lucius' fingers had formed a triangle over his abdomen. He was the picture of aristocratic superiority, and for a moment Snape bristled at the image.

Lucius knew that he was projecting the persona that most irritated his friend, but he felt it was necessary. It was time for Severus to realise that he had allies other than that manipulating, old, man. Allies that had a much better understanding of what 'sacrifice' meant than an elderly wizard who fought by sacrificing others in his place.

Snape had a sudden vision of Harry's drawing that he'd taken from the boy's cupboard. He recalled how Harry smiled, at him, when he visited him in the Infirmary. He remembered the look of joy no one else in the castle had seen as Harry had looked to him right after his Sorting. In the drawing, crayon-Harry stood beside crayon-Snape, assured in the safety the wizard offered him. To protect him from, not just his enemies, but from well-meaning, manipulative, old wizards.

For the moment, Snape was the Dark Man of Harry's dreams. His savior. And, in that moment Snape realised something that he did want. He wanted to be more than a rescuer, more than the Dark Man, he wanted...

"I can give him what his relatives didn't," Snape spoke in humble tones he'd never thought to hear come from himself. "I want to give Harry a family."

Lucius smiled. A warm smile, that although touched with a bit of triumph, it was triumphant in that Lucius was pleased that Snape discovered he could truly trust his old friend.

"It shall be done, my friend," Lucius assured him.

Even though Snape's own smile was grim, he was a pessimist after all, he knew that Lucius spoke the truth.

Lucius escorted his friend to the door of Malfoy Manor. He was pleased at what had been accomplished over the tea. Before the younger man stepped through the door, he stopped him by lightly placing his hand upon Snape's shoulder.

Snape turned to regard the hard look behind Lucius Malfoy's genial smile. "I know that you miss nothing, my friend. Watch Dumbledore. As Narcissa says, we must protect the children. They are our future. Do not allow a foolish, old man to harm them."

Snape merely nodded his agreement. Then, he stepped out of the door, turned on the spot, and vanished.

Monday, Sept. 23, 1991

Albus Dumbledore's first (unpleasant) surprise arrived at breakfast on Monday morning. A great eagle owl, the beast owned by Lucius Malfoy, dropped a letter off from Narcissa to her son, and a second one from Lucius. The owl continued to soar up to the staff table. A very official parchment scroll was unceremoniously dropped into the Headmaster's oatmeal. The great owl perched, quite imperiously, upon the back of Dumbledore's chair. With a loud screech that deafened all chatter in the Great Hall, the bird shook out its feathers, and contentedly tucked its head under its wing and appeared to fall right to sleep.

The Headmaster would not read the scroll at breakfast, but disturbed by the owl, his appetite was ruined, and so he retreated to his office.

Draco, meanwhile, was staring in apprehension at the two letters from his parents. They were in red envelopes.

"That's a Howler," explained Teddy Nott.

Tara leaned over and patted Draco's arm. "It's best to get it over with quickly, Draco." She gave him a sympathetic look.



Draco tapped the first one from his father and it jumped up into the air in front of his face. His father's voice, heavy and full of disapproval, came from the Howler.

"Three detentions, Draco? The term has hardly begun! Do you realise the shame you are bringing down not only upon yourself but the Family name? Your temper will be the death of you, Dragon, if you don't start shaping up, and now! Recall what I told you when you left for school. You are eleven years old. Do not lead me to believe that you are five or I shall come to Hogwarts and remind you, clearly, just how I punished you at five."

The Howler exploded and Draco, his cheeks red, his mouth gaping, sat stiffly and nearly in shock.

Tara gave the little boy a small pat on the back. A second hand, Hermione's, joined Tara's in the comfort. "Come on, now. Finish the second one," urged the prefect gently.

Draco swallowed. He stared at the second red envelope. Harry, who had been sitting on the other side of Hermione, leaned over her. "Just open it, Draco. It can't be any worse than the first."

Draco cast Harry a quick stricken look before he tapped the Howler that was from his mother. It flew up, opened, and also began to speak but with Narcissa's voice.

"Draco. I am so terribly disappointed in you." Her voice was soft, but it was so sad that Draco let out a snuffle. "Your father and I will be coming this weekend to visit. Do behave. I love you, dear." The Howler burst into confetti and Draco suddenly dropped his head onto his arms.

Tara continued to pat his back while Harry, Teddy, Blaise, and Hermione looked on with sympathy.

"Mr. Malfoy," came a soft, velvet voice behind the children. Snape had appeared silently behind them. Draco lifted his head, doing his best to keep anyone near from seeing his tears. "Come with me." As the boy got up, Snape felt a hesitant touch to his arm. Glancing towards the right of Draco he could see Harry looking up worriedly. The boy's green eyes were pleading with him not to punish his upset

friend any further. "I merely require your friend's assistance, Mr. Potter. You will see him in your first class."

Harry nodded with relief. He then watched as Snape, with Draco in front of him, took the boy out of the Great Hall.

Once out of the Great Hall, Snape directed the boy to walk beside him. He shortened his pace so Draco would be able to keep up. Draco did not say anything, but Snape could still hear faint sniffles and saw the child wiping at his eyes.

"I believe I mentioned to you that there is something I can teach you to help you to better control your temper, Mr. Malfoy?"

"Yes, sir. You did," answered the very sad, little voice.

Snape put his hand gently on the boy's shoulder. "It is a mental discipline called Occlumency that I think would benefit Mr. Potter as well. Would you be averse to sharing the time with him in learning this skill?"

Draco shook his head first, then replied vocally, "No, sir. I wouldn't mind learning Occul... Occumen..." his voice faded.

"Occ-lu-men-cy," Snape pronounced the word for the boy. "I shall send you and Mr. Potter a schedule." They walked in silence for a few more minutes and at one point, Snape conjured a handkerchief for Draco. They went a bit more and then the Head of Slytherin House stopped. "Draco." Draco turned to face his teacher and Snape was pleased to see that the crying had stopped. "Your father will be proud of you if you learn this."

Draco managed a small smile. "I know he will, sir. I'm just... well... will Harry's family be proud of him, too?"

Snape's lips thinned at the thought of the Dursleys. "Harry's relatives unfortunately do not realise the gift they have in their nephew. I believe it is up to us to be proud of Harry, Mr. Malfoy."

Draco's smile widened as he nodded. "Yes, sir. I believe so, too."

Placing his hands on the boy's shoulders, he turned Draco around to face the classroom of his first class of the day. Feeling much better,

Draco gave his teacher a wave goodbye and walked into the classroom where he saw Hermione and Harry waiting for him.

Tuesday, Sept. 24, 1991

Hermione had awakened in a bed of slime. Rising early from the ghastly mess, she had choked back her tears so no one would benefit from any sort of reaction, and cleaned her bed with the Scourgify spell that Professor Flitwick had taught her after she requested that he teach it to her. Hermione was glad that she'd wakened so early and her dorm mates, who had no doubt pulled the vile prank, were still asleep. She snuck into the girls bathroom and was able to put her filthy nightgown into the laundry and wash the gunk from her hair. To her dismay, the moment the water touched her hair, it changed from her mousy brown, impossible curls to dull, absolutely straight, black hair.

"Oh no!" she cried under her breath as she looked at a lock of the changed hair under the water. "It looks like Snape's!"

Hermione could only wash herself and the hair. She didn't know enough magic to change it, so she knew she would have to endure more teasing from her cruel House mates and probably from the other Houses as well. Worse, when Professor Snape saw her hair, he might think she was mocking him.

It was going to be an awful day.

Hermione had escaped seeing anyone in the common room and once she left Gryffindor Tower, she practically ran to Professor McGonagall's office. She knocked several times, but it was obviously too early. Giving up, she decided that today she'd just not attend any classes at all. She then ran the entire way down to the Entrance Hall. She started in surprise when she heard a familiar voice.

"Hermione?"

Hermione came to a full stop and spun around. Harry was in the Entrance Hall. He was staring at her hair.

"Who did it?" he asked as he walked closer.

Hermione was proud of herself for not breaking down into tears as she replied, "My dorm mates. They filled my sheets with slime and whatever it was, once the water touched it, it changed to this." Her voice cracked. She took a moment to compose herself. She would NOT cry. "Professor Snape is going to be so angry at me, Harry!"

Harry grabbed her hand. "No he won't. C'mon!"

Harry led his friend down into the dungeons and to the door of the Slytherin common room. He had her wait while he disappeared inside. Hermione stepped back into the shadows and allowed her eyes to jerk back and forth hoping the Potions professor wouldn't show up.

A few minutes later Harry emerged with Prefect Tara Anglaise and behind her was Draco. Draco just gaped while Tara studied the problem.

"Finite incantatem!" she cast as she waved her wand. Nothing happened. She tried a few more spells, including a glamour, but whatever had caused Hermione's hair to change colour was resisting all of Tara's attempts.

After almost twenty minutes, Draco griped at the prefect, "You're a seventh year!"

Tara glared down at the short firstie. "If I had time to study whatever did this, Mr. Malfoy, I'd be able to come up with a solution."

Hermione's tears threatened again. "I don't know how long this will last!"

Tara patted Hermione on the back. "We'll go to the professor. At the very least, if he can't do anything, he'll know this wasn't your fault and won't get mad at you."

A small snuffle did escape as Hermione nodded her agreement. As Tara led the way to Snape's office, Harry and Draco walked on either side of the girl.

Draco whispered to Harry, "Where were you?"

Snape was just finishing preparing to leave for a staff meeting when the knock came on his office door. He eyed Prefect Anglaise who motioned the distraught girl to come out from behind her.

"It wasn't her fault, sir," declared Harry before Snape even had time to react.

Snape rose to his feet and walked around his desk to stare down upon the Gryffindor. His gaze went to Harry. "I had surmised that, Mr. Potter." He returned his gaze to Hermione. "What can you tell me about this, Miss Granger?"

Hermione told her story and then Tara told her teacher what spells she had tried to reverse the problem.

"I believe that it wasn't a spell that did this," Snape said as he took a strand of Hermione's changed hair between his thumb and index finger. "Some sort of potion. Unfortunately, without a sample of the 'slime' I am unable to brew a counter potion."

Hermione put her hand into her robe pocket and pulled out a small phial. She handed it to Snape.

"You took a sample, Miss Granger?" he asked with almost concealed surprise.

"I thought it might be a good idea, sir," she replied.

"Indeed it was," he nodded. Hermione beamed brightly. "Miss Anglaise, please go to Professor McGonagall in the staff lounge and let her know that Miss Granger was pranked, once again, and I am brewing an antidote. Miss Granger will take her breakfast in my office with her friends." The Potions Master need not mention that he'd much more enjoy tackling this problem than sitting through a boring staff meeting.

"I'll do that, sir." Tara then smiled and squeezed Hermione's shoulder. "You'll be right as rain, soon, Hermione."

The three children thanked Tara. When she left the office, Snape summoned an elf and ordered breakfast for all of them. Once they were done, he ushered the children into the classroom lab and had them help him to analyse the slime and then brew an antidote.

Hermione's hair was back to its normal bushy, brown colour before Snape had his first class of the day.

It was going to be a good day.

Wednesday, Sept. 25, 1991

Draco woke at seven in the morning, and just as Harry's bed was neatly made yesterday, it was so again. Draco frowned at it. What was going on? Where was Harry?

Shrugging the mystery off as one he couldn't solve this second, Draco slid from bed and went into the bathroom to shower and brush his teeth. A half hour later, he finished getting dressed, smoothed the covers on his bed, and ran out of the dorm.

Draco was just about to head into the Great Hall when he saw Harry pushing through the tall, oak doors into the Entrance Hall.

"Harry! Where were you?" Draco ran over to the boy who looked as though he hadn't had a good night's sleep.

Harry smiled gamely as he met his friend. "I was just taking a walk."

Draco frowned. "Bit early for that." He peered at Harry. "I know you went to bed last night, but did you get any sleep?"

Harry hesitated. It was natural for him to do so. Nobody had ever asked after him, and certainly nobody ever cared enough to know what he was thinking or feeling. But, Draco was his friend, right? Friends cared. They wanted to know if you were feeling all right or not. Harry knew that if something were wrong with Draco he'd want to know so he could help.

"Sort of," he hedged cautiously.

"Nightmares again?" asked Draco softly, as though it were a big secret.

"Yeah..." Harry stopped as they entered the Great Hall and made their way to the Slytherin table.

There were pitchers of juice and milk and teapots with hot water. Food wasn't served, yet, as it wasn't quite 8:15 in the morning. Harry poured some milk (he'd decided yesterday that pomegranate juice was too sweet) and Draco had some as well.

"So?" asked Draco, after he took a big swallow of his cold milk. For a brief second he sported a milk mustache until he wiped it off with his sleeve. "Same stuff you've been dreaming about or something else?"

"Something else," Harry said quickly, trying to dismiss any further talk about his nightmares.

Draco did continue to talk about nightmares, but instead he told Harry about one of his. "When I was five I kept having this terrible nightmare about these really scary guys in black robes and silver masks. They were coming to take me away, but my father was there and he was killing them with all sorts of spells. Only thing is, everytime he killed one, another would appear." Draco's voice dropped to a hush. "Then, the nightmare would really get awful because they weren't after me anymore, they were after my father. And... and... they'd get him." Draco shuddered at the memory of the nightmare.

Harry had been listening intently and was horrified by the dream. "So what happened? Did you wake up?"

Breakfast appeared and for a moment the nightmares were forgotten as the two boys prepared their oatmeal. Draco liked honey, so he had fun pouring the honey in a thin stream all over the oatmeal's surface in intricate little patterns. Harry liked butter and maple sugar so he stirred in a pat of butter and then added a spoonful of the maple sugar. After a few bites, their conversation resumed.

"Don't tell anyone, but I screamed really loudly," Draco replied.

"Did you cry, too?" asked Harry sympathetically.

"Oh yeah. I was a mess but my father came and... well, he'd do what fathers do." Draco looked up to see that Harry was frowning in puzzlement and was about to ask, what did fathers do? "You know.

Like when Professor Snape helps you with your nightmares? That sort of stuff."

Harry seemed genuinely surprised by this information. "Your dad would hold you... and...?"

"Yeah, cause that's what fathers are supposed to do," Draco insisted firmly. "I think mums probably do that for girls. Father would hug me and tell me that the bad guys couldn't get to me because the wards around Malfoy Manor were really strong." Draco's voice again dropped to a conspiratorial whisper. "Want to know what's really scary?"

Harry didn't, but his head had other ideas and nodded in the affirmative.

"They were Death Eaters."

"What were Death Eaters?" Harry had the same question on the tip of his tongue, but Hermione, who had arrived late for breakfast, sat down beside Harry and dropped her heavy book bag onto the floor. "So? What are they?"

"You-Know-Who's followers," chimed in Marcus Flint. Draco and Harry both shot the smart aleck seventh year matching scowls. "Dear old daddy was one and he pleaded the Imperious didn't he, baby Malfoy? What a bleedin' coward!"

"Shut up, Flint!" Harry yelled sharply.

Draco squeezed his eyes shut as inwardly he tried to tell his temper not to do anything.

"Awwww, the ickle baby's gonna cry," Flint continued nastily as he ignored Harry.

"Flint! Leave him alone!" ordered Tara who had no idea what was going on since she just arrived. She could see Flint looming over Draco who seemed hunched in upon himself. Hermione was standing firmly between Harry and Flint.



"Zip it, bitch!" growled Flint towards Tara though he did not take his hungry eyes from Draco. "C'mon, baby Malfoy. Give up those tears now!" His laugh grated over them all.

Draco's fists clenched tightly and his breathing became shallow. He felt Hermione's hand on his shoulder, and that small bit of compassion was nearly his undoing. Just as he thought he was going to lose, and to cry in front of Flint...

"AWK!" Flint let out a strangled shout as he felt someone, very strong, grasp the back of his collar and yanked it. He coughed from the brief choking sensation, and was about to give his attacker a few boils with the Boils Hex when he realised the person he'd just pulled his wand upon was a very angry, stormy-eyed Head of Slytherin House.

"Oh shite!" gasped Flint as he tumbled backwards into Harry, Hermione, and Draco.

Draco had opened his eyes in surprise, and seeing a perfect target, Flint's ear, the boy grabbed the sensitive lobe of the ear, and with a tight-lipped scowl upon his face, twisted as hard as he could.

Flint let out another yell and before he could hex the boy he'd been teasing, Snape's voice countered, "Accio Flint's wand!" The wand flew from Flint's hand and slapped firmly into Snape's empty hand.

"Get up, Mr. Flint!" ordered the professor.

Marcus Flint scrambled to his feet without any help from anyone. Although he was almost as tall as his Head of House, he still felt small. To compensate, he tried to sneer imposingly at his teacher.

It didn't work.

"Go to my office, Mr. Flint." His gaze was dark, and cold, and Snape was very angry.

"But I haven't had my breakfast, yet!" he whined.

That was a mistake and the boy instantly knew it. "Do I look like I care about your breakfast?" sneered Snape.

Flint shook his head, and before he could make things worse for himself, he shouldered his way past Tara and jogged out of the Great Hall.

Snape leaned over Draco who had dropped his head so he was eyeing the surface of the table. He touched two fingers to the child's chin, and gave him a small smile as Draco looked up. Draco returned the smile wearily as he saw the warmth and concern in his teacher's eyes.

Snape spoke so only those around Draco could hear. "You did very well, Mr. Malfoy. I am pleased that you did not retaliate. Ten points." Snape straightened and then made his way to the staff table.

Tara sat down on one side of Draco and Harry on the other. Hermione sat opposite so she could face her friends. Tara warmed up Draco's and Harry's bowls of oatmeal while grapefruits appeared for her and Hermione. They all ate in companionable silence until Tara left when she was finished.

When the trio were alone, Draco said softly, "My father wasn't a coward."

"What was Flint talking about?" Harry asked gently.

Draco stirred his spoon idly in his oatmeal, but didn't eat any of it. "I don't want to talk about it here," he finally said.

Harry patted Draco's back and Hermione nudged his arm as she served him some fruit.

Right before lunch the trio of friends went outside to sit on the bank of the lake. It wasn't, yet, too cold, so the giant squid was showing a tentacle or three languidly every now and then.

The three sat in companionable silence until Draco began talking softly.

"My grandfather, Abraxas Malfoy, was a really bad man. I think he was probably as insane as Aunt Bellatrix is. Anyway, my grandfather was a follower of You-Know-Who." Draco glanced up worriedly at Harry. Everyone knew that it was Voldemort that had killed Harry's

parents and Draco was a bit worried that Harry might think he was evil, too.

"Did your grandfather know about my parents?" Harry asked quietly.

Draco nodded miserably. "I don't know for sure, but he probably did. He was really close to the Dark... I mean to You-Know-Who and everyone says that those wizards and witches did some really horrible things." Draco swiped his arm at an errant tear and Hermione took his other hand in hers, offering what little comfort she could.

"Flint said your dad was a... a... Death Eater?" asked Harry warily.

"Yeah, but he never wanted to be!" Draco blurted quickly. "Father had to do what grandfather said to do, though"

Hermione nodded knowingly, "Your father was part of the Death Eaters Tribunal."

Draco hung his head in shame. Harry asked, "What's the Death Eaters Tribunal?"

Hermione sighed. "I read about some of it in Hogwarts: A History, but I found out more in Babbage's History of the Wizangamot. It was a huge trial to take care of all the followers of Voldemort, and some of them were Death Eaters." Hermione had looked up the Death Eaters for a bit of a refresher during their History class as Professor Binns droned on about some goblin war. "Death Eaters had this Mark that Voldemort put on all his closest and most loyal followers. The trials were to figure out how many followers were actually loyal because Voldemort..."

"Quit saying his name, Hermione!" snapped Draco who had been wincing each time she spoke the dark wizard's name.

"Sorry. Anyway," she continued, "You-Know-Who used the Imperious Curse a lot on those followers who wouldn't quite do what he wanted them to do. There were a lot of Death Eaters who claimed they were Imperious'd."

"Well, a lot of them lied!" Draco huffed defensively. "My father didn't! But it's because he's a Malfoy and my grandfather ruined our honor

that everybody thinks my father's a liar and a... a..." he stuttered as he looked up at his friends in horror.

"A what?" asked Harry, almost demanding.

"A m-m-m-Muggle killer!" Draco turned away as he felt Hermione's comforting hand slip from his. To his surprise, Hermione was engulfing him in a hug, and a few seconds later, Harry was hugging them both.

Draco sighed in relief. His friends understood.

Harry, Draco, and Hermione were just in time to flow into the Defense Against the Dark Arts classroom with all the other students. Draco started to go towards the seats at the front of the class where they sat last week, but Harry urged him to remain in the back. Draco frowned, then shrugged and the three sat down.

Professor Quirrell arrived soon after everyone was seated. Halfway to the front of the class, he paused, looking around for someone. When he spotted Harry, his watery blue eyes stared at the boy.

Harry winced and rubbed at the scar on his forehead. Hermione stopped him. "Don't, Harry! It's all inflamed. Maybe you should see Madame Pomfrey."

Harry just shook his head as Quirrell finally stopped staring and made his way up to the front of the class.

"Why was he staring at you like that?" asked Draco in a concerned whisper. "That was creepy."

"I don't know," Harry said tightly.

"M-m-mister Potter!" called the professor. His smile seemed friendly enough, but Harry couldn't help pushing his back against the back of his chair.

"Sir?" he replied as respectfully as he could.

"Y-y-your assistance? P-p-please?"

Harry felt a heavy dread in the pit of his stomach. He didn't want to move.

"Q-q-q-uite harmless, M-m-mister Potter. Do c-c-come up," encouraged Quirrell with a very genial smile. He waved his hand in a beckoning gesture.

"Just do it and get it over with," Draco hissed, and nodded to his friend.

"I'm sure he won't hurt you, Harry," smiled Hermione.

Harry sighed, but then left his chair and headed up towards his teacher. He touched his scar, thinking it might hurt, but it didn't. Puzzled, he still warily approached his teacher.

"T-t-today, st-st-students," Quirrell addressed the class, "we'll b-b-be learning about..."

- Harry Potter -

There was still no pain in his scar, but he felt as though something was inside of him. Slithery, slimey, icky.

- Oh yesssss... I remember you, Harry Potter. My young nemessssissss. -

Harry felt hatred dripping down his spine and he shivered. He was no longer aware of where he was.

- You weakened me, Harry Potter, but each day I grow sssstronger. Have you sssseen me in your dreamssss? Do you hear your mother'ssss delightful sssscreeamssss? -

Harry saw a flash of red and he felt something, arms tightening around him; protectively.

"Please! Not my son! Not Harry!" screamed a voice whose timbre Harry had once known as it sang softly to him at night. Now the voice was heavily tinged with fear... terror... and he let out a whimper.

- ...delightful sssscreeamssss... -

And her voice screamed as green light suffused everything!

"Harry!" screeched Hermione as Harry dropped to the floor like a boneless sack of skin.

Draco pushed ahead of everyone. Professor Quirrell was leaning over his friend, muttering something. Whatever it was, Draco only saw a threat. Without analysing the situation, he plowed his body into the professor and knocked him away from Harry. Quirrell's head impacted with the leg of his desk, knocking his awful smelling turban slightly askew and him out.

Draco, ignoring his teacher, turned around to see how Harry was. Harry was still unconscious but Hermione had knelt down by her friend and was holding a handkerchief to his forehead. Draco grimaced. The handkerchief was almost all red.

Thursday, Sept. 26, 1991 - 3am

In his dreams the nightmare screams were neatly packed away into a trunk that was then pushed deep into a dark cupboard. A gentle hum of some lost lullabye pervaded the dreams and Harry looked around the jumbled mess of his mind.

He wanted to cry. Or shout. It was messy and scary despite the pretty voice he was hearing. He wanted someone to hold him and to tell him it was all going to be all right.

"Harry?"

Harry lifted his head hopefully. He knew that voice. "Dark Man." It was very far away.

"Harry, child, come along now. Wake up."

"I'm coming Dark Man! Don't go away!" shouted Harry. He ran away from the jumbled mess of painful memories and towards the voice of safety and comfort.

Harry woke with a start and a sob in his throat from his dreams. Before he even had to reach out and silently ask, arms enveloped him. Warm wool that smelled of spices and herbs surrounded him.

Harry wrapped his arms around the waist of his teacher, not even caring that as he sobbed, his tears were wetting the man's long coat.

After several minutes, Snape felt the tears waning and the hitch in the boy's breath that signaled a near end to the tears. "Harry," he asked, his deep voice thrumming gently in his chest. "Can you tell me what happened in Professor Quirrell's class." He felt the shaking of the boy's head.

Snape sighed, patted the boy's back a bit more and then pulled Harry away slightly. "I know that you're frightened, Harry, but did you know you scared all your classmates?"

"No, sir?" Harry hiccuped.

"Miss Granger and Mr. Malfoy told me what they saw, but I'd like to know from you what happened."

Harry's hand reached up and he touched his teacher's cheek, as if to reassure himself that the worry he saw in Professor Snape's eyes was real. Snape was a little taken aback by the gesture, but he gave the child a smile to encourage him.

Harry didn't speak right away. Since the odour of disenfectant was doing away with the more pleasant smell of the older man, Harry's nose wrinkled as he recognised that he was in the Infirmary.

The small boy sighed, and began to speak quietly, "I didn't want to help Professor Quirrell, but he just was being so nice and... so anyway, I went up to the front of the class. I couldn't hear the professor anymore. There was a voice... in my head... it was the same one I heard in my nightmares!" Harry suddenly made the connection.

"Nightmares?" asked Snape. He hadn't been wakened in a few days and had hoped that the nightmares Harry had had earlier were gone.

"They started about two days ago, sir," Harry explained. "Only, I'm not sure if they are nightmares. They seem so..." he grimaced in distaste, "real."

"Go on, Harry. Let me see if we can't figure this out together," Snape urged. He wanted to hear what had happened in the DADA class,

but if Harry's nightmares were connected to what happened in Quirrell's class, then he needed to know.

Harry slid back so his rear rested on the bed that Snape and he currently were seated upon, and his legs draped over his professor's. Snape did not move to push Harry's legs from his.

Harry blinked, and swiped at a stray tear. He then began to recite the dream he'd had for the last three nights, "I wake up in the Forbidden Forest. I don't feel scared or anything like that. I seem to know just where I am, too. And... and I'm hungry. More hungry than I ever was at the Dursleys. I'm so hungry that everything hurts inside of me. That's when I see it... a unicorn. I use some kind of spell to trap it and then I... I..." Harry's complexion went ashy and Snape straightened in worry. "I-I-I pull out a knife and I cut its throat!" Harry gasped out. Tears sprang from his eyes and his arms wrapped tightly about himself as he was now reliving the nightmare. "It was silver. It's blood was silver. And I... ugh... I d-d-d-drunk it!" Harry wrenched himself from the horrible vision of his dream and sought out his professor's eyes. "I felt sick, but it tasted soooo good!"

That was too much for Harry's stomach. It protested sharply and he threw up over himself, his legs, and Snape's. Harry was mortified and tried to scramble away from his teacher, but Snape stopped him.

Snape was more horrified by the nightmare Harry had told him, then the fact that the boy had just thrown up on him. A few Scourgify spells, plus a Disinfectant Spell had the mess vanished and cleaned. He didn't ask anymore about the nightmare or DADA class as he fussed over his littlest Snake and helped him back under the covers of his hospital bed. When finished, he sat back down on the edge of the bed and Harry grasped his hand tightly. Snape gave it a comforting squeeze.

"You heard a voice in your head in DADA class?" Snape asked carefully.

Harry nodded. "In my nightmare, I spoke only once. I said, 'I mussssst feed.'"

Snape felt a shiver of cold racing down his spine. He had not understood what Harry said, but he knew the language. He had



heard it crooned by the darkest wizard of all to his beloved familiar, a huge snake. Harry was speaking Parseltongue!

Harry saw the fear in his teacher's eyes and he backed away. "I'm turning bad!" Harry scrunched the blankets down on the bed as he scrambled to get off the bed.

"No!" Snape caught the boy who struggled wildly against him. "Harry! You're not bad!" Snape's voice was sharp and firm and to his chagrin the wild boy relaxed so suddenly, as if his very Soul were giving up, that he became as substantial as a rag doll in his professor's arms. Snape tried to speak softly, warmly to the child, but Harry would not respond and Snape was feeling a panic building in his chest. Supporting the boy's lolling head he spoke in the terse tone his students were familiar with.

"Look at me, Mr. Potter!" Harry's spine stiffened, a bit, so Snape kept up the tone that had frightened ten years of students. "Do not make me take points or give you a detention, Mr. Potter! I will not put up with this attitude while I am speaking to you. Look. At. Me!" He ordered and just managed to stop short of shaking the child.

It was enough. Harry's bones and muscles came back to his skin and he shifted, sitting up, and locked his eyes upon his professor's. Tears glimmered at the edge of his red-rimmed eyes.

"I saw it in your eyes, sir," he said so sadly it caused a rip in Snape's heart. "You think I'm bad."

Snape, still supporting Harry, but now with one arm, cupped the boy's cheek with his other hand so he wouldn't look away. His voice was quieter, but no less firm than before. "You listen carefully to me, child. You are not a bad boy. You had a terrifying nightmare and what you described in your nightmare did frighten me."

"What? Why?" Harry asked, the hope in his eyes painful.

"You spoke in a language that is very rare amongst wizard-kind..." and then he could say no more. That kernel of panic was blooming in his chest. Snape knew he had to say this just right or he would break this vulnerable, little boy.

Snape took a moment to shift Harry more comfortably on his lap. For a moment the boy looked away from his teacher, concentrating his attention upon the many, cloth covered buttons of Snape's long coat in the manner a much younger child might. He did not break Harry's concentration.

"Harry, have you ever spoken to snakes?" he asked in his gentlest, most cautious voice possible.

Harry nodded, then spoke up. "On Dudley's birthday Aunt Petunia tried to call Mrs. Figg to sit me, but she was gone or something so they had to take me to the zoo with them. The best part was the reptile area." Harry raised his head and gave his teacher a faint ghost of a smile. "I like snakes."

Snape returned the brief smile. "As do I, child," he agreed and Harry smiled a bit more as he got the small joke.

Feeling a bit more secure, Harry continued, "There was this really big snake that just looked really unhappy and when no one was looking, I started talking to her. Nobody would have caught me but then the glass disappeared and she got out." A small giggle escaped.

"You were pleased about that, hm?" asked Snape with a smirk.

"I was. Uncle Vernon wasn't.

Snape's lips thinned. No, he doubted very much that Uncle Vernon was at all pleased. He drew in a deep breath. "Harry," he said, wrapping his arms protectively around the boy. "Can you tell me what happened in Professor Quirrell's class today?"

He could feel small fingers worrying the buttons on his coat as Harry pressed his cheek against his professor's chest. Harry slowly began, timidly. "The voice? The one in my nightmare?" Harry's own voice hitched worriedly so Snape carded his fingers through the boy's messy hair. Harry stopped with the buttons and curled a fist in his teacher's robes before continuing, "I heard the voice in my head, but I didn't feel like I did in my nightmare. I was scared this time and I couldn't get away and it... he... he wanted to kill me but he killed HER instead! And there was all this icky green light and she screamed and he laughed and... and..."

Harry's arms suddenly gripped so tightly about Snape's waist that it was painful. Trapped in the horror of that moment, Harry begged the Dark Man to keep him safe. Only, instead of calling Snape Dark Man, he called him by his very, very secret name Harry only ever used in his dreams...

"Please don't let him kill me, daddy!"

It was nearly an hour and a Calming Potion and a Dreamless Sleep Potion before Snape was finally able to calm the little boy down and get him back into bed. Even though it was nearly four in the morning and he was quite tired himself, he roamed the halls of Hogwarts deep in his thoughts and they were troublesome.

Daddy.

He wasn't as disturbed by the fact Harry had called him daddy then he had expected. It had shocked him, of course, but as he intended to adopt, or even kidnap (Merlin, was that something even to consider?) the child, he didn't mind it. Something within his chest, down to his soul told him that it was right. Potter would kill him. That is, if he weren't dead already. Perhaps he might haunt Snape for daring to replace him? He felt that Lily would approve.

Oh, Lily! Harry had seen Voldemort killing Lily! And the poor child remembered her screams.

Snape had to stop in his wanderings where he rushed over to one of the windows, yanked it open and welcomed the chill breeze that heralded the oncoming cold weather of winter. If he hadn't, he was worried he might vomit.

He stood in the chill for who knows how long. Snape only knew that at some point his fingers were in danger of early frostbite so he closed the window and forced himself to return to his quarters where he poured himself a half measure of scotch that Minerva had given him last Christmas.

As he held the glass of pale amber liquid courage in his hand, he went to the Floo, threw in a handful of powder, and called out, "Minerva McGonagall's Quarters!"

Kneeling on the hearth, his head in the green flames, Snape felt like he waited for an eternity before the sleepy witch arrived in her sitting room tying the belt of her tartan plaid sleeping robe about her waist. Her hair, that Snape was so used to seeing in its severe bun, fell in soft, brown waves touched by white and grey to her hips. It threw him for a bit and he felt rather stupid as he stared at his colleague.

"What is the matter, Severus?" she asked crossly.

"I am very sorry for disturbing your sleep, Minerva, but I need to speak to someone and you're the only one I can talk to. Will you come through?" he asked.

"Give me a few minutes, if you would?" He nodded in reply. "Good. Have some strong tea ready, then."

Snape retreated from the green flames and as the connection closed they faded back into the orange and red. Snape went into his kitchenette and began to prepare the tea.

By the time the tea was prepared Minerva had come through his Floo. Her hair was back in its severe bun and she was dressed in the casual robes he'd sometimes seen her wear on her shopping trips to Hogsmeade.

Snape served the tea and for a long moment the two of them drank in silence.

"Harry woke this evening," Snape began quietly.

Minerva nodded. She, like everyone in the school, had heard how Harry had frozen in front of the DADA class and then fainted dead away so no one could awaken him.

"Was he able to tell you what happened in class?" she asked.

Snape nodded. "More than I wished to know," he gusted and then took a long sip of the hot tea, nearly burning his tongue.

Minerva listened quietly as first he told her about Harry's nightmare. She did not interrupt, but she paled considerably. He then told her about how Harry heard the same voice from his nightmare in his head and that it wanted to kill him.

"You-know-who?" Minerva finally asked and her hands were shaking slightly so that the teacup rattled against the saucer.

Snape nodded and summoned the scotch. He poured a small bit into her tea and Minerva thanked him with an inclination of her head.

The younger man waited until his colleague had sipped a respectable portion of the scotch laced tea before adding, "He saw Lily getting killed and heard her scream."

"Oh sweet Circe! No! He couldn't have," Minerva's voice quavered and she put down her tea before it could slip from her hands.

Snape nodded miserably. "He was terror stricken, Minerva, and he asked... he begged me to protect him." He rose to his feet and turned to face the fire. "Minerva, what if it isn't even safe for Harry here?"

"The wards would keep him safe from intruders, but you're worried about The Artifact," she stated.

"I can only surmise that it would be something the Dark Lord desired and I... cannot trust Albus anymore, Minerva." His hands clenched so tightly behind his back that his knuckles were white. "What if he's made it possible for Him or one of His most trusted to get into the castle?"

"He wouldn't!" declared Minerva staunchly.

Snape spun, aiming his darkest glare at the woman. True to her Gryffindor heritage, she did not flinch. Even so, he snapped sharply, "Are you so certain? He's lied to you, to me, and he plans to send Harry back to those damned Muggles! We don't know bloody anything that he's up to, yet we stupidly, and blindly, constructed a devil's nightmare of an obstacle course on his word alone!" He began to pace angrily. "Did you know that his scar was bleeding when Madame Pomfrey was summoned to Quirrell's class?"

"I hadn't heard..."

"I didn't know either. Not until Poppy told me when I went to visit after my classes and to sit with him. She was worried that she might

not be able to stop the bleeding, but once she left the DADA classroom she was able to do so."

Minerva stiffened under Snape's sudden, intense gaze. She almost felt like he was accusing her of something, but she wasn't sure what. Scowling, she demanded, "There's more, isn't there, Severus?"

"Harry's a Parseltongue," he replied flatly.

The older witch's hand went to her mouth in shock. "Whatever does this mean, Severus? What is going on with that wee bairn?" Her distress showed starkly as her usually cultured brogue thickened.

Snape shook his head. "I think I don't wish to know, but I have a terrible suspicion that I do know. I also think that Albus might know something as well." Snape dropped into his chair. "Albus mustn't learn of Harry's ability to talk to snakes, Minerva. I'm certain the Headmaster already disapproves of the boy being in my House. If he knew Harry were a Parseltongue..." he raked his fingers in frustration through his hair. "Merlin's teeth, Minerva! What if Albus thinks Harry is the incarnation of the Dark Lord?"

Thursday, Sept. 26, 1991

Later in the morning the Potions Master, who had not slept at all, arrived at the Infirmary a few hours before breakfast to check on Harry. He was not at all pleased to find the Headmaster watching vigil over the boy.

Snape made certain his Occlumency shields were tight and then he locked his distrust and anger at the Headmaster behind them. When he was ready, he greeted Dumbledore cordially.

"Headmaster. You're up early."

The Headmaster turned in the plush chair he was seated in and his eyes twinkled at the Potions professor. "Ah, my boy! Good morning to you. I thought you might sleep a bit later as Poppy informed me that you were here nearly all night."

"I was behind on my grading, so I decided to get up early and get some of it finished," Snape explained as he went to stand a bit closer to Harry.

"I don't think I've ever heard of you spending night watch over one of your Snakes before, Severus." Though it was an observation, Snape heard the question beneath.

Snape did not turn to face the older wizard. "I usually do not do so, but I was concerned for the boy. His scar..." Snape indicated the child's forehead where a lock of hair had slid aside to reveal the lightning bolt shaped scar that still appeared as though its edges were infected.

"Yes. Poppy did mention that she had a bit of trouble with it, but it seems quite well now." As the Headmaster leaned over to brush more of the raven haired fringe aside, it took every ounce of control Snape had to not knock the man's hand away from the boy.

For a long moment the two men were silent before the Headmaster spoke again. "Poppy tells me he woke up rather upset last night while you were here, Severus. Did Harry say anything to you?"

"Nothing that was coherent, Headmaster," Snape lied smoothly. He faced his employer allowing Dumbledore the illusion that he was able to Legilimens him freely to discern the truth. As the old man's mind touched his, he realised for the first time that the unasked for intrusion was as distasteful to him as when the Dark Lord had slammed into his mind. He was glad he had nothing in his stomach.

Snape faced Harry again. "Headmaster, have you any idea what it could mean? The bleeding of his scar?" Snape masked his worry and made sure to tinge his tone with an appropriate amount of curiosity.

"I have wondered, to be sure, since I received Madame Pomfrey's report about the incident. Unfortunately, unless Harry sees fit to tell us something, I cannot make anything better than a guess."

"Might I inquire what your guess is, Headmaster?" Snape asked with a slight sneer to show his irritation at Dumbledore's usual evasiveness. As he was often irritated with the man, this was not difficult to produce.

Dumbledore scratched his chin thoughtfully as though he needed to consider replying. After a few minutes he did so. "I wonder if the curse scar isn't similar to that Mark on your arm, Severus."

Snape's surprise was genuine for that was not something he had considered. "You believe that the Dark Lord marked the boy?"

"Voldemort," he caught Snape's flinch at the Dark Lord's name and shook his head. "Voldemort may not have intended to Mark Harry, but may have done so by accident."

Snape regarded Dumbledore, as the situation required, but then allowed his thoughts to whirr and shift as he turned over several ideas in his mind. It was only a blink of an eye, but it gave Snape the moment he needed before asking his next question.

"Is it possible, Headmaster, for Mr. Potter to be possessed by the Dark Lord, if indeed that scar is his Mark?" Snape asked carefully.

"It is entirely possible, Severus," Dumbledore replied sadly and a bit too quickly for Snape's comfort. The Headmaster then rose so that he was eye to eye with his Potions professor. "I need not remind you, my boy, that I must be told if Harry manifests any powers that are unusual, or if he should have nightmares that are... far too realistic to be such."

Snape stiffened but made sure not to show how the Headmaster's reminder caused him just a touch of fear. Was it possible for the man to already know of Harry's nightmares? No. Snape nodded curtly and added, once again, a touch of irritation to his voice. "I will not hesitate, Headmaster. You know where my loyalties lie."

The twinkle in the Headmaster's eyes faded for just a moment as he patted Snape's forearm; the left forearm. "I sincerely hope that I do, my boy." He then smiled and that dangerous twinkle was back. "I shall see you at breakfast. Do let me know if Harry awakens."

Snape inclined his head as Dumbledore passed him. He did not breathe until the older wizard had gone for at least a minute. Then Snape dropped into the plush chair letting out a breath of relief.



His peace was short-lived as Madame Pomfrey entered the main room of the Infirmary from her office. She gave Snape a nod as she proceeded to examine Harry. Snape watched her meticulous care.

"I hadn't expected him to still be sleeping," mused Snape, needing the sound in the heavily silent Infirmary.

"He's more than exhausted, Severus. Whatever happened to him affected his magical core as well." She clucked her tongue and bent over to tuck the covers up to his chin.

This alarmed Snape and he sat up straighter. "How exhausted?"

"About a third. It's as though he fought a duel with a wizard more powerful than he was." She sighed sadly.

Snape shook his head. In a way, the child had been dueling with a much stronger wizard. "Will he sleep the rest of the day, Poppy?" She nodded. Snape rose from the chair and vanished the offensive, paisley, plush furniture. "I'll return at dinnertime to see how he's doing." Snape was almost at the door of the Infirmary when he stopped and turned around.

Poppy Pomfrey, showing an amazing insight, spoke before he could ask. "If the Headmaster is here when Harry awakens, I'll notify you, Severus. Don't worry yourself."

At the end of the day Snape returned to watch over Harry. According to Poppy Pomfrey the Headmaster had not returned to visit the boy.

Poppy emerged from her office with a tray full of potions. They were for nutrition, hydration, calming, and a magical boost that would help in replenishing the magical core. Together they spelled the potions into the still sleeping child. When Poppy returned to her office, Snape levitated Harry slightly so he could change the linen. When it was all fresh, he Scourgified the boy's pyjamas. He used a more mild Cleaning Spell that Healers used on comatose patients to clean Harry as much as was possible without water and soap.

Finally he lowered the exhausted boy back into his bed where he took the time to tuck the covers around him and brush away a lock of hair where it had fallen across his cheek.

He then seated himself, took a book from his pocket, and began to read.

Two children played on the swings in a park. The sky was darkening and in the distance thunder rumbled ominously. The little girl, her straight, red hair wind-blown and tumbling around her shoulders, slid off the swing and ran, as if to get closer to the storm.

The little, black-haired boy panicked and jumped from his swing. He ran after the little girl. To his surprise, she spun around to face him and began to grow, becoming a woman. She knelt down in front of him.

"Keep Harry safe," she said softly as she held onto his upper arms.

"Lily?" the small boy asked.

"I trust you, Severus."

Thunder cracked in the sky and green lightning burst down towards the two children, striking the grown Lily. She screamed. Little Severus screamed as well.

Snape shot awake with a shout, "Harry!"

The wizard's iron will took over and he was quickly composed from the dream he'd had. He looked over at the still sleeping boy and laid his hand upon the child's back, needing to feel him breathing.

After several minutes he leaned back in his chair and summoned his book which had fallen to the floor.

Friday, Sept. 27, 1991

Harry finally woke up at almost two in the morning. It was dark in the Infirmary except for two torches and the moon slipping in through heavy drapes over the windows. He raised himself up on his elbows and when he turned his head to the right, he saw the Dark Man.

His cheeks coloured as he remembered being so afraid and asking... begging his... daddy... oh God! Had he really said that? He meant to never say that! It was his secret... Harry slithered down under the

covers, hoping against hope that maybe his teacher had been asleep.

He wasn't.

Snape had been awake. He hadn't wanted to meet his nightmares again, and he honestly wished to be awake when his Snake finally woke. Even in the dim light he'd seen the boy's embarrassment. Snape smirked knowing that Harry had recalled earlier when he'd referred to his teacher as 'daddy'.

The Potions Master put away his book and rose from his chair. Harry had squirreled himself under his blankets and rolled himself up into a ball. Snape pulled the blankets down halfway and patted the child's back.

"Come along now, Mr. Potter. I know you're awake." Snape moved away to gather Harry's potions and to order some soup for him.

While his Head of House was across the Infirmary over by the Floo, Harry slowly uncurled himself, gave a slight shiver, and then slipped from the bed. He felt a bit wobbly, but he was steady enough that he was able to walk the short distance to the loo.

Snape turned away from the Floo just in time to catch sight of messy black hair and striped pyjamas making for the loo. He walked over to Harry's bed and set down the potions on the night table. Very soon he heard the muted flush of the loo, then water running in the sink. Then he heard the pitter-patter slap of bare feet on a stone floor.

"Get into bed, Mr. Potter," ordered Snape as he reached for one of the potions.

Harry scrambled into his bed and eyed the potion in his teacher's hand. "What's that for, sir?" he asked.

"A magical boost to help the replenishment of your magical core. You need to drink it down before you eat anything." Snape handed him the phial and Harry regarded the potion in the glass.

As Harry took the phial in his hand, it went from clear to a glittery lavender blue. "That's wicked," breathed Harry.

"Indeed," the Potions Master agreed dryly. "Drink it down."

Harry uncorked the phial and tipped it into his mouth. He hadn't much experience with potions, but he figured they were medicine, just like in the Muggle world, and medicines never tasted good. This one was different, though. Harry couldn't honestly say that it tasted nice, but he did feel as though he'd swallowed dozens of tiny, twinkling stars. His tongue was tickled by a tripping fizziness that caused him to burp. Little transparent bubbles emerged with the burp and Harry couldn't suppress the euphoric giggle that followed. He then felt an oddly pleasant blossoming that began in his chest then spread outward, up and down his spine and out to his fingers and toes.

There was a simple smile upon Harry's face and his green eyes sparkled. "Wow! Is it like that for everyone?" he asked.

Snape smirked and shook his head as he levitated the soup bowl over to the boy. "Only for children. Adults require a Magical Boost Potion that's a bit more sober." Harry frowned slightly in puzzlement. Snape elaborated, "Adults don't care that much for bubbles. It's too... amusing."

"Oh! I like it. Do I get more?" he asked, still feeling an edge of euphoria through his veins.

"You'll have two more doses before you get to leave the Infirmary, Mr. Potter." Snape handed him a spoon and then he sat back down with his book.

For a short while there was only the sound of Harry slurping his soup and Snape turning pages in his book as he read.

Halfway through his soup, Harry mumbled an apology. It was said so quietly, and so quickly, Snape almost didn't hear it.

"What do you have to apologise about, Mr. Potter?" asked Snape as he laid his book in his lap with his index finger tucked into the pages to save his place.

Harry's cheeks coloured as he stared intently down into his soup. "F-for what I called you earlier, sir. I didn't mean it. I'm sorry."

Snape felt a tiny twinge of pain that the boy hadn't meant what he said. He clamped down upon it mentally and the relaxed air he'd been showing around Harry stiffened ever so imperceptibly.

"It is no matter, Mr. Potter," Snape replied so flatly that Harry's head snapped up.

Too late he realised that he'd said something, but what, that had hurt the older man. Harry couldn't help himself as he apologised again. This time Snape ignored it.

"Are you finished with your soup?"

Harry nodded miserably as the soup was vanished. He then curled up under his blankets, rolling onto his side and curling himself up as a hedgehog might.

Snape, seeing the child become even smaller as he curled up and away from his teacher, sighed inwardly. Had he not seen the boy's embarrassment earlier? How could he so easily take umbrage with Harry when he, the adult, had known the child was speaking from his terror. Anyone so afraid would not take time to lie and for him to feel a sting when Harry tried to take back the words that no one was obviously ever to hear, especially him, well it was natural to feel a touch of hurt. But, to take it out on the boy was... well... mean.

Snape, who had had every intention of leaving the little boy to his dreams, and possibly his nightmares, rose from his chair and leaned over the still curled up form. He brought the covers up, tucked them in and then placed a warm hand upon the boy's back.

"Sleep easily, Harry. I will remain the rest of the evening in case you need me."

The small form let out a gentle sigh and Harry's body relaxed beneath the covers. As Snape seated himself once more, Harry turned so he was now facing his professor though his eyes did not open. He yawned and soon Harry was sleeping peacefully.

They were both forgiven.

A/N: This was quite possibly the most difficult chapter to write. I felt simply awful in having to put sweet Harry through that mess.

A couple of people have complained about the long chapters and normally I don't write chapters so long, but I am in a different mind-set for this story. When I get writing, it's hard to find a place to stop. If you truly dislike the very long chapters, I shall see about breaking them up, otherwise, they will be posted as is.

Please note that this story's timeline follows the 1991 calendar on the Harry Potter Lexicon.

Be wary of any mistakes (of which I hope there are none that are glaring). I wanted this up for you all for my birthday, today, the 29th of April.

Sept. 28, 1991 - Saturday

The weekend found Harry still in the Infirmary and bored. He was eyeing the ceiling, counting the cracks, and wishing for some homework when Draco and Hermione arrived. As Madame Pomfrey was nowhere to be seen, they both jumped onto his bed. Hermione hugged Harry and then dragged her bookbag between them.

"Draco told me you wanted to learn more about your wand, Harry, so we found this book in the library so you could look it up," said Hermione as she pushed *Wand Lore & History* by Imelda Sparks towards him.

Harry grinned at the book. "Yeah! Thanks, Hermione!" As he flipped through the book, Hermione sat on his left and Draco on his right so all three of them could read.

"Applewood!" Harry pointed at a drawing of a lovely apple tree blowing in the breeze, its blossoms falling like pale pink snow to the ground. Harry began to read aloud.

Applewood is one of the unique woods used in making wands. Rarely used, but quite powerful as it engenders transformative magic and the positive magics of love, truth, honesty, and peace. It is a healing wood prized by the Celts of old who worshipped the magics of the Elements. Thus, Healers often gravitate towards an applewood wand.

The applewood is also considered to be strongly related to the magic of motherhood and a child who is blessed with an applewood wand will often discover that its magical warmth is similar to that of a mother's loving warmth.

A wand made with applewood can also be highly prized by a witch or wizard who is born with the power to create spells. This is the transformative power in applewood. The wielder of such a wand and who has such creative power within them, will discover that their creativity is enhanced threefold.

Cores that are complementary to applewood are: phoenix feather, unicorn hair, and ashwinder ash.

Note: a true applewood wand will resemble the branch it is taken from. A wandmaker of great skill will know better than to force the wood into the standard wand shape most witches and wizards are familiar with.

A quick consult of the table of contents led them to the meaning behind various wand cores. Harry found ashwinder ash and read that aloud.

The ashwinder is a curious, magical snake that is born from the hot embers of the remains of a magical fire. They only live an hour, long enough to lay their eggs, before dissolving into a pearly grey ash. Their eggs and ashy remains are highly prized by potionneers. It is the ashy remains that are used as a core for wands and it is a difficult wand core for wandmakers to work with.

Ashwinder ash has magical protective properties and a wand with an ashwinder ash core will give the wielder an easier time of casting protective spells and shields. Fire magic will also come easier to the wielder.

Woods that are complementary to ashwinder ash are: yew, applewood, and willow.

"Wicked!" breathed Draco with a low whistle.

"That's marvelous, Harry! Such a beautifully complex wand you have."

Harry just grinned. He really liked his wand. For the next half hour the three friends continued to peruse the book until Draco suggested that they play a game of Exploding Snap. They were just getting started when Madame Pomfrey came from her office to dose her patient and stopped the game.

"You are supposed to be resting, Mr. Potter," chided Madame Pomfrey.

"But, I'm bored," complained Harry.

"This isn't a playroom," began Poppy. "If you have homework or reading, that you may do, but Exploding Snap is not only noisy it's too excitable for you."



"Can we draw, Madame?" asked Harry suddenly.

Madame Pomfrey didn't answer right away, and she noticed all three students held their breaths. She smiled. "I have no objection to that." With several waves of her wand, Poppy transfigured chairs into lap desks, then summoned paper and a large box of crayons. All three were soon happily occupied in the quiet pursuit of drawing and colouring their creations.

Dressed in casual grey trousers, a white cotton shirt, a long, deep green tie, and a knee length trench coat of dark brown to keep out the chill, Snape strode purposefully down Privet Drive. He passed the Dursleys immaculate, little house, and gave it a scowl as he continued on. His goal was the only misfit house on Privet Drive.

Mrs. Figg's cottage was a dowdy old two story that needed paint and a few repairs to the porch. The yard was a riotous overgrowth of weeds, rosebushes, and other flowers planted with no organisation in mind. All of it was preparing to die for the winter and so it gave the yard a forlorn appearance. A wooden fence that was missing boards, or had many that were hanging by a single nail, surrounded the property.

Cats. They were everywhere. Snape could see about ten. Not one was beyond the property's border. The majority of the ten perched upon various places upon the wooden fence. One cat sat upon a branch in the skeletal tree in the front yard. Two more cats were seated upon the porch roof that drooped on its right side. One last cat, a champion climber, no doubt sat upon the highest peak of the roof of the house. Every last pair of eyes were upon him as he approached and he couldn't repress a shudder.

Snape didn't mind cats but he definitely didn't like Mrs. Figg's cats.

Doing his best to ignore the watching felines, Snape made his way up a narrow, weed-littered, cobbled path to the porch. He stepped onto the old porch and heard the ominous sound of creaking wood. He took two quick steps to the front door and was not at all surprised to find that the screen door hung askew from one hinge. Resisting the temptation to fix it, he carefully pulled the screen door open and knocked firmly on the main door.

A voice from within warbled, "Oh! I hear you! Do give me... just a moment, dear!"

Snape waited, as patiently as he could. Two minutes later the door swung open and he was looking down at the short form of Mrs. Figg.

Arabella Figg was no less dowdy than her house. Her hair was cut short and tamed with some sort of home perm. The hair also appeared to have been cut by Mrs. Figg herself. She wore a checked gingham dress that fell to her knees with a somewhat stained apron over the dress. Over that she wore a cardigan that possibly belonged to the late Mr. Figg and was a dull olive green. Upon her legs were sturdy support hose of beige and on her feet were perfectly sensible, brown shoes.

"Why Professor Snape!" she smiled brightly. "I don't believe I was expecting you. Do come in, dear. It's getting positively chilly out there and it wouldn't do for you to bring back a cold to your students."

He was ushered into the overly warm house and directed into the living room. There were cats lounging everywhere and Snape's sensitive nose was assaulted by the disagreeable odour of cat litter and urine.

The furniture was an eclectic, mis-matched bargain basement set. A sofa, two plush chairs, and another threadbare couch under a window. All the furniture bore the imprint of cats who used the furniture to sharpen their claws and despite strategically draped lap rugs, quilts, and afghans, all the furniture sported tufts of their stuffing coming out here and there.

Mrs. Figg directed him to the least abused chair and then made her way towards her kitchen. "How lucky that I've just put the tea on. Sit down, dear, and make yourself comfortable."

Snape stared down at the chair that was covered with cat hair. Taking out his wand, he quickly vanished the fur, and then he cast a Freshening Spell so he wouldn't succumb to the odour of the cats and their litter boxes. He then removed his trench coat and draped it over the back of the chair before seating himself.

Once again he was conscious of all the cats in the room looking at him. He glared them, silently warning them that should any of them dare to turn him into one of their perches, he'd use them in a potion. A cat on the sofa, clearly unimpressed by his glare and silent threat, flopped over on its side, yawned, stretched, and proceeded to go to sleep.

Mrs. Figg bustled back out of the kitchen carrying a tea tray that held a pristine China tea set with a blue pattern. In this odd house Snape expected the dishes to be chipped, but they were in perfect shape. Mrs. Figg had made little sandwiches and small cakes to go with the tea. She put it down on a wide table between the chairs and sofa and proceeded to pour the tea. She then handed him a cup. Taking an experimental sip, Snape had to admit that it qualified as one of the best teas he'd ever had.

"Quite good, Mrs. Figg," he complimented sincerely.

She blushed, tittered, and sat down with her tea. "Thank you so much, Professor Snape. What brings you to my humble home?" she asked.

"Harry Potter," he intoned. "Were you aware that Mr. Potter was Sorted into my House?" he began.

"Was he now? I suppose Albus was disappointed over that, wasn't he?"

Snape regarded the woman before him carefully. That was an insulting remark to make. He did not immediately reply.

She smiled apologetically. "Oh dear! I don't mean to insult Slytherin at all, Professor Snape, but I do recall Albus telling me a number of times that he expected Harry to be just like his father." She sighed. "He isn't, though, poor dear."

"I am discovering that there is very little of James Potter in his son," Snape said, a hard edge to his voice.

"If Vernon and Petunia had chosen to spoil Harry as they do their Dudley, he might have been more like the precocious James I remember." She smiled and chuckled lightly. "The Marauders... dear me they were a bunch of hellions even as adults." Mrs. Figg sipped

her tea. "Mind you, though, Professor, I never quite liked Sirius Black. A Peter Pan that one was. It's no wonder he came to the end he did. Sad. Sad, but that's what happens when a child is allowed the latitude he was." She looked up at Snape. "You and Sirius weren't fond of each other, were you, Professor?"

"That's putting it mildly," he said with slight sneer. He hated James Potter, but as for which of the four Marauders were the most distasteful and annoying, that would have to have been Sirius. The least Snape could say about James Potter was that when Harry was born he began to get more serious, to mature. That didn't happen with Black who took every opportunity to needle Snape at the Order meetings.

Not once during those years did Dumbledore ever intervene. Instead, the senile old coot would sit at the head of the table at headquarters smiling indulgently at his treasured Gryffindors. It was always Minerva who would pounce upon the immature lion and cuff him about the ears, metaphorically speaking. Although, there was that one time, that Snape relished, in which Black had stepped so far over the line that Minerva had physically cuffed the young man and taken him out of the room by his ear. Ten minutes later when they returned, Minerva stood staunchly next to Snape as a sullen, and rather cowed Sirius Black took his wounded pride slinking over towards James, Remus, Peter, and Lily.

"Mrs. Figg," Snape began cautiously. "Were you aware that Harry didn't make it on time to Hogwarts?"

"Why no! He didn't? What happened? Did Vernon not wish to take him to the station?" she asked. "Vernon does get terribly fussy about that car of his and I know he..."

"The boy's uncle didn't want Mr. Potter to go to Hogwarts." Snape interrupted. He felt if he didn't, the short woman would go on, ad nauseum. "He burned everything that Mr. Potter purchased in Diagon Alley," he continued bluntly. He gazed sharply at the Squib, capturing her gaze so she couldn't look away from him.

"Oh dear..." she gasped as her eyes glazed over slightly as though she were viewing the not too distant past. "That was the bonfire the neighbors complained about." Her eyes came back to the present and she shook her head and clucked her tongue. "There really

shouldn't be any burning in this neighborhood but I do remember the smoke. Some of my poor cats were coughing for days afterwards."

Snape snorted in derision. He could care less about the woman's damned cats. He needed to know if she knew about the abuse. "Mrs. Figg," his hard voice brought her wandering mind back to the present. "Mr. Potter told me that you were his babysitter. Did you ever see any bruises on him? Injuries that a child wouldn't normally have?"

Mrs. Figg frowned in consternation. This was not something she wished to discuss over such a pleasant tea. "Bruises?" She asked softly.

"Yes, bruises," Snape repeated himself.

"But boys are always hurting themselves," she said, a bit airily. "And Harry and Dudley do play terribly hard. Those two are always getting in fights..." her voice drifted and for a moment Snape thought the old woman's mind might have slipped its tracks. She came back, though, and shook her head. "A few bumps, bruises, and scrapes, but nothing out of the ordinary, Professor Snape."

Snape put down his tea and drummed his fingers against the armrest. Mrs. Figg watched him, deep concern etched into the wrinkles around her eyes and mouth. "Did the boy never look a bit ragged to you, Mrs. Figg? Rather too small?"

"Harry Potter never looked anything but the picture of health to me, Professor, so I'd like to know, clearly, if you're implying something," she spoke starchily, her voice tinged with perceived insult.

"Madame Pomfrey did a history on the boy after I rescued him, from a cupboard under the stairs, and discovered that the child had been abused and starved for years," Snape said bluntly, his own tone hard and implacable. "I would like to know how you, his babysitter, never saw any of this."

Mrs. Figg began to pet the cat on her lap too aggressively. It let out an indignant yelp and leapt off her lap onto the floor. "I never... saw... any of that," she hissed like one of her cats and glared.

Snape's fingers again drummed upon the armrest as he studied the Squib. The Legilimens he did was swift and gave him the answer he needed, she was not lying. "So, Albus never knew."

Although the question was rhetorical, Mrs. Figg replied stiffly, "What was there to know, Professor? Harry never said anything to me, and I never saw anything out of the ordinary. Like I said, he and Dudley fought a bit, but any scrapes or bruises I saw, were minor."

Snape went back to drumming his fingers on the arm of the chair as he stared out into the side yard through a nearby window. He hadn't wanted to discover that Albus had known of Harry's abuse, and so he hadn't, but now he was disturbed by the apparent fact that Albus had never checked in upon the boy.

Why? Didn't the man know that Petunia...? Well, no, he would not have known anything about Petunia Evans. Only he, Snape, had known that Petunia had very little fondness for her little sister. Petunia's jealousy had become a bitter pill of hatred by the time Snape and Lily were fast friends. When Lily's parents had been killed by Death Eaters, Petunia's hatred could have turned to outright fear. Then, to be saddled with what she feared most? A magical child... her sister's child?

The bruises? The injuries? If the younger boy's bruises had been anything like the ones he'd found on the boy when he rescued him, how could anyone not have seen those? Picture of health? his mind scoffed in disbelief. Had it been Harry's own accidental magic that was the key?

It wasn't unheard of. So little was understood of a child's accidental magic, but Snape had read some of the studies that had been done. He remembered how, when he was five, a bubble had encased him, thus protecting him from his father's blows. In talking to his own Snakes that had been hurt by parents or siblings, he had learned that accidental magic sometimes protected them, too. Accidental magic was fickle, though, and not something a child could count upon. This Snape knew as well. The bubble that had protected him once, never did so again.

Snape frowned, lost deeper in thought as he solved the puzzle slowly within his mind.

Was it possible that Harry had unwittingly discovered a way to use his accidental magic to heal himself? To help the boy in concealing from other adults his injuries so that they would not see them and make Harry's life more difficult by 'helping' him?

"More tea, dear?" Mrs. Figg's earnest voice interrupted Snape's thoughts. He looked up at the woman who stood over him, and then to the cup and saucer he held in his other hand. He nodded and Mrs. Figg poured the tea from the China teapot.

Snape was caught off guard when she patted his forearm, right where his Dark Mark lay hidden beneath his clothing. "Believe me, dear, had I known that Harry was being mistreated, I would have said something. Petunia and Vernon are a disagreeable pair, but never did I suspect them capable of hurting a child."

"Not any child," Snape muttered, "a magical child."

Mrs. Figg sat down with the teapot in her lap and nodded miserably.

Madame Pomfrey declared Harry well enough after breakfast to leave the Infirmary with the stern caution that he was to return if he felt ill. Pleased to be free, the three friends headed down to Hagrid's hut to visit and play with Fang. Hagrid watched over them as he tended to his growing pumpkins, pleased at hearing their laughter and Fang's excited barks as they played catch. At a little bit before noon, a house elf summoned them to the Headmaster's office.

The three children raced each other to the castle (Harry won) and then quickly made their way to the Headmaster's tower office. The gargoyle blocked their way, but the house elf had given them a password (Snickerdoodle) that the gargoyle accepted. It moved aside and the three friends rose the moving, spiral staircase up to the top of the tower.

Three apple-cheeked, disheveled children entered the Headmaster's office. The benign face of the old Headmaster was briefly acknowledged, but all three turned their attention to the immaculate couple that were seated on the other side of Dumbledore's desk.

Draco stiffened at once. The couple were his parents. He'd conveniently forgotten that they were coming this weekend. Presumably to further punish him for his detention.

"Hello father. Hello mother," he greeted them quietly.

Lucius nodded to his son, his expression stern, mindful of the business the two would deal with later. Lucius then turned his attention to Harry. A slight smile ghosted the edge of his lips, but the stern features remained. Harry wondered if he was in trouble with Mr. Malfoy. "Mr. Potter. It is good to see you again."

"Thank you, sir," Harry smiled wanly.

Narcissa moved from her chair and practically glided over to her son. She kissed Draco's forehead and then moved to Harry. She did not reach towards him, but smiled down at him. "I'm very pleased to finally meet you, Mr. Potter. My son tells me wonderful things about you in his letters."

Harry shot his friend a scowl and Draco coloured. "Just that you're my friend," he mumbled defensively. Harry smirked and chuckled, and Draco gave his friend an apologetic smile.

Narcissa then approached Hermione who shuffled nervously under the very elegant woman's appraisal. She didn't notice Harry and Draco watching. "You must be Hermione Granger."

"Yes, ma'am," she replied respectfully and couldn't help but execute a tiny curtsy. As Narcissa was blocking her view, she did not see Lucius Malfoy's nod of approval at her small use of gentility.

"I'm dismayed that my son didn't tell me anything about you, dear girl." Narcissa glanced knowingly at Draco and his cheeks coloured in blush once more. "Your teacher, Professor Snape told us about you, though, Miss Granger. He's thinks quite well of you."

It was Hermione's turn to blush as she smiled with bright hopefulness. "Does he really?"

"He does indeed, Miss Granger. He did go on to say that you're a bit rough around the edges, but I'm sure we can take care of that." Narcissa's smile softened the hard words. Then, to Hermione's



surprise, Narcissa Malfoy stepped beside her, placed a warm hand against her back and nudged her, just a bit, towards her husband until she was standing behind Hermione with her fingertips delicately upon her shoulders. "She is a lovely child, don't you think so, Lucius?"

Lucius gave Hermione a charming smile as he leaned forward, seeming to support his position by leaning on his ebony, silver headed cane. "I do see the young lady's potential, my dear, but if you do not mind, I would like to concern myself more with her academic career." Lucius beckoned to Hermione and she froze until she felt another gentle nudge. Not hesitating any longer, she stepped forward to face Lucius Malfoy. "Your Potions teacher tells me that you strive to please your instructors to the detriment of your fellows, Miss Granger."

Hermione dropped her head. Although the man's tone was not scolding, she knew that Professor Snape must have told him what a know-it-all she was. A slim, gloved finger rested under her chin and prodded her to lift her head.

"Intelligence is nothing to be ashamed of, Miss Granger," Lucius chided gently. "However, it is quite unnecessary to prove to others that you have it. The greater reward is to expand your knowledge and to learn all that you may whilst remaining content with your studies. What others think matters not."

"I will keep that in mind, sir," she said politely.

"See that you do." He nodded for her to return to her friends. Hermione did so, casting puzzled glances at Draco, and then Harry for good measure. They both shrugged, just as puzzled as she was herself.

"Mr. Potter," the Headmaster spoke up. "If you would be so kind as to sit over here you and I have a bit of business to discuss later."

"Okay, sir." Harry hurried over to the chair that was to the left of the Headmaster's desk and seated himself.

"Mr. Malfoy, Miss Granger, do sit down." Dumbledore's eyes twinkled and Lucius smiled the smile he always used for public functions. It easily disguised his true feelings for whomever he was

meeting. "Would anyone care for a sherbet lemon?" Harry was about to agree to one when he caught a slight shake of the head from Draco that was echoed by his father. He said nothing.

"No thank you, sir," replied Hermione politely. She rarely indulged in sweets.

"Very well then. Let's get to the business at hand." Dumbledore smiled at Hermione. "Miss Granger, Mr. and Mrs. Malfoy would like to be your Wizarding Sponsors as you attend school here at Hogwarts."

Hermione glanced at the Malfoys, but gave the Headmaster a look of puzzlement. "Sponsors? For what reason, sir?"

Dumbledore began to explain, "Muggles cannot see Hogwarts. It is the wards that protect Hogwarts from being seen by the Muggle world, thus it is far too risky a prospect to change the wards and the magic for a simple visit. If the Malfoys were to sponsor you, they would act on your behalf in your parents stead." Dumbledore added, "If you had a magical family to sponsor you, Miss Granger, it is to them that you would go to if you needed advice, or a home to stay if it was needed. Your sponsor family would also receive letters from Hogwarts as to your progress, any injuries you might receive, or any other troubles you might have."

"Would my parents still know what's going on?" asked Hermione.

The Headmaster nodded. "They would be kept informed and the Malfoys would work with your parents in regards to what your needs are during the term at Hogwarts."

"That sounds very reasonable, Professor." Hermione glanced shyly at the Malfoys and then blushed at Draco's absolutely delighted grin.

"I thought you might think so, Miss Granger. I will send a letter to your parents in order to open a correspondence between them and the Malfoys." Dumbledore rose from his chair and addressed Lucius and Narcissa, "For now, I'd like you to go to the visitors tower where a nice lunch will be waiting for all of you so that you can get acquainted. Niccy!" A house elf popped into the office.

"Master Headmaster, sir?" bowed the little elf.

"Escort Miss Granger and the Malfoys to the visitors tower, if you would?" requested the Headmaster.

"Nicky will do so, Master Headmaster!" The house elf grinned and then beckoned to the Malfoys and Hermione.

Narcissa glided up beside Hermione and took her hand in hers. She smiled warmly down at the little girl, and Hermione felt a flutter in her heart as she looked up into the beautiful woman's kindness.

"Thank you, Headmaster," Lucius spoke cordially, but his charm was only upon the surface and Dumbledore knew it. Before Lucius Malfoy disappeared through the door with his family and Hermione, Lucius turned to look at young Harry. Without glancing at the Headmaster, he kept his gaze on Harry, but addressed Dumbledore. "You will make sure that Mr. Potter meets us for lunch, Headmaster?"

Dumbledore gave the aristocratic wizard a condescending smile and a nod. Lucius ushered his family from the office. As soon as the door was closed, the house elf beckoned to the group. Lucius put a hand on his wife's arm. She touched his gloved hand and whispered to him, "Hurry."

Harry, his heart now thumping nervously in his chest, looked into the watery blue eyes of the Headmaster. Although Dumbledore was smiling, quite affably, Harry didn't feel like smiling back.

In the brief eyeblink of a moment, Harry felt an odd itchy, tingling sensation in his mind. It was an annoying sort of buzz that made him want to reach into his brain and slap it. As he fought it, the buzzing persisted, becoming more annoying. The itch became a small pain that slowly began to blossom into colours: red, yellow, fiery orange.

Just as quickly, though, it all ended as though a light had been turned off. Harry was breathing heavily and he was slumped back in his chair. His head ached and his tummy felt a bit sour. The Headmaster was still staring at him, but the man was now frowning.

"Sir?" Harry asked hesitantly.

Dumbledore conjured his most grandfatherly of smiles and his blue eyes twinkled as he picked up the tin of sweets. "Do have a sherbet lemon, Harry."

Harry stared down at the tin that held little lemon shaped sweet. He had to admit they were mouth-watering, but he could not forget the slight, worried shakes of the heads from both Draco and his father. When the Headmaster brought the tin closer, Harry only hesitated for a second before taking one of the sweets and pretending to pop it into his mouth. Harry was sure the older man didn't see that he had palmed the lemon sweet. A minute later he hid it within a fold of his school robe because he couldn't get to his pocket. It had gotten sticky from his sweaty palm, so he knew it would stick to the fabric.

Even a great wizard can be foiled by a simple sleight of hand, and Harry's little trick of palming the sticky sweet was one he'd learned at the harsh hands of his cousin. Dudley liked to make his cousin eat horrible things: dirt, worms, bugs. Dudley did this because he knew that Harry was often hungry and when he ate something awful tasting, he made the funniest faces.

Harry only fell for his cousin's stupid trick twice. Dudley wasn't as smart as Harry and so, when his cousin gave him insects, or worms, or any other icky substance to eat, Harry pretended to put it in his mouth and cleverly palmed the offending 'food' so that no one saw him. He would pretend to chew, then gag, and make the funny faces that would get Dudley braying like the donkey he was. It would also, afterwards, give him some time alone.

And now, as Harry pretended to suck upon the lemony sweet, the Headmaster watched him intently. Harry's only moment of panic came when he wondered, briefly, what the sweet would have done to him. Was the Headmaster simply waiting for Harry's lips to pinch together in sour distaste, or was there something in the sweets?

Dumbledore smiled in satisfaction and Harry, who felt his heart thump harder, had to tell it to quiet down or it might be heard. Just as the Headmaster thought that Harry ate the sweet, so too, did he not hear Harry's heart beating so loudly that it was proclaiming the boy's nervousness. Harry knew better than to show fear, to anyone, and he kept his face and posture relaxed.

The Headmaster leaned forward, with an aggrieved sigh. "Tell me, my boy, have you ever heard the story of the Philosopher's Stone?"

Saturday, Sept. 28, 1991 - cont.

Harry had learned from his relatives, and from everyone else he encountered, how to read people. Whether it was their eyes, body language, or tiny twitches and tics most people would quickly dismiss, Harry knew what they all meant. He'd had no chance but to learn this skill. Although his relatives were the first to hurt him, and to teach him most of these skills, he soon discovered as he attended Primary school with his cousin, that everyone had to be carefully watched.

There were too many people out to hurt him.

Albus Dumbledore looked like a kindly, old man. Quite a bit like the Merlin illustrations in some of Dudley's books. Harry knew that it wasn't real, though. He had distrusted the Headmaster the moment he'd met him in the Infirmary after his professor had rescued him.

As he had done then in the Infirmary, Dumbledore's twinkling blue eyes studied Harry's reaction to the question he'd posed - have you ever heard the tale of the Philosopher's Stone? Harry blinked and then shook his head as he felt that horrid itchy feeling again. With the return of the itchiness, his headache, which had abated for a bit, came back to life. Deep down inside of Harry he knew there was something wrong. This affable, sweet, charming old man, was somehow causing Harry's headache. He forced his eyes to look over the man's shoulder at all the portraits of the past Headmasters and Headmistresses.

"Let me tell you the story, then," said the Headmaster as he directed Harry's gaze away from the portraits and back to him by gently grasping the boy's chin between his thumb and index finger.

Harry did his very best not to flinch at the older man's touch. The Headmaster's blue eyes were twinkling as he told the story about a brilliant alchemist, but that twinkle had a hard edge to it that made Harry very uncomfortable.

Pay attention! Harry chastised himself within his mind. How many times had he not paid attention to Uncle Vernon or Aunt Petunia

when they were shouting at him and it only made the punishment worse? Truthfully, he could care less about some dumb alchemist, but since he had no choice but to listen, Harry did so.

Dumbledore's story continued as he explained that the alchemist created a miraculous stone that would give anyone who brewed a particular potion with it, an extended life. This alchemist, this wondrous wizard, had stopped aging and had lived to be nearly 600 years old.

Impossible, thought Harry. But, he was a wizard. He went to school in a castle that was filled with portraits that talked, paintings that moved, ghosts that ran through the Great Hall, armour that would run after you, and three-headed dogs hidden behind large doors on deserted corridors. Like Alice in Wonderland, Harry had gotten used to believing at least three impossible things before breakfast.

Harry suddenly made the mistake of squirming uncomfortably in his chair and darting a glance towards the Headmaster's closed, office door. When his eyes snapped back to settle their attention on Professor Dumbledore, that eerie, hard edge was back, glittering in the pale, watery blue eyes. The itching was back and with it pain bloomed so harshly, Harry would have thrown up if there had been any food in his stomach.

Frightened as he was, he pushed all of that fear into a cardboard box, closed it up, and shoved it with dozens of other boxes, into a cupboard. He blinked at the Headmaster and the pain faded, but that sharp twinkle was still in the man's eyes.

Dark Man, please help me! a very small, helpless boy deep inside Harry whimpered.

Lucius didn't watch as Narcissa with their son and the Granger girl were escorted to the visitor's tower by the house elf, Niccy. He needed to find Snape, and he only knew of one place to find the man; in the dungeons.

One would not think that Lucius Malfoy would run for any reason, and perhaps they might think he'd never run in his life. Lucius would sneer haughtily at such a statement, and then declare in a haunted voice, that an adult had many things to run from.

The wizard's long legs carried him through the twisting corridors of the dungeons first towards Slytherin House and then past the portrait of Salazar Slytherin and on a few more feet to Snape's office. He paused, breathing smoothly, and knocked on the heavy oak door. It was locked and there was no answer. Lucius cursed.

"Severus!" he snapped.

Snape had just arrived through his personal Floo from Hogsmeade after visiting Mrs. Figg. He was to join the Malfoys in the visitors tower for lunch, so he went straight to his bathroom to freshen himself and to change into his preferred black robes.

Standing at his sink, in a clean pair of trousers and bare feet, he stared at himself in the mirror.

Dumbledore had never looked in on the boy.

Snape splashed the cool water upon his face, but it did little to help the gnawing deep in his stomach.

Dumbledore intends to send the boy back.

"Why?" Snape asked his reflection and was only pleased that his mirror was not one of those obnoxious ones that talked back.

I never knew where he was. I never asked where Dumbledore had put Harry. Would I have taken the boy if I'd known the only alternative was Petunia?

That question stopped the Potions Master cold. Indeed. Would he have taken a baby, Potter's brat, to raise?

He had been brushing his teeth during these thoughts and angrily spat the mouthful of toothpaste into the sink. He rinsed his mouth and put away his toothbrush.

It was useless to ask himself such a question. He had been taken to Azkaban seconds, it seemed, after being caught. Snape had not the access to the Prince inheritance since the Ministry had seen fit to freeze his assets. Neither did he have the good fortune that Lucius

had used to stay out of the accursed place. Ohhh, Dumbledore had come to Snape's 'rescue', but that was three months later.

The Headmaster had never visited him once while he was in the wizarding prison. He'd been stripped of his robes, beaten upon by his guards, and his nightmares had been some of the worst ever as the Dementors fed upon any and all happiness that ever he had.

And what glorious evidence had the Headmaster brought to his trial, to present to the Wizengamot? His word. And a pensieve memory of Dumbledore's that had laid bare his repentance, his tears, and then his promise to spy upon the Dark Lord and his Death Eaters for... not the Light, but for Dumbledore.

"There was no Vow," Snape muttered as he buttoned his white linen shirt and tucked it into the waist of his trousers. "All this time I have been free and not once did I think about where Harry was, or if he was all right."

He bowed his head as he held onto the open doors of his wardrobe. Snape had made a Vow, but it had been to Lily. He had Vowed to protect her son and he had failed.

A gentle, cool breeze that ruffled his unbuttoned cuffs curled around him, causing the ends of his hair to lift, and fall. Snape raised his head as he felt... fingertips? A hand touched his cheek. Closing his eyes, he tried to lean into the touch but it faded.

"I will not fail him this time, Lily," he whispered in a choked voice.

Sometimes a student might bother Snape on Saturday but he had made it clear via a memo he had his prefects post in the common room last night that he would be unavailable this weekend. The chime that he had spelled on his office door was insistent and so he adjusted his robes and left his private quarters to emerge through a door hidden against his office back wall.

A familiar voice shouted, "Severus Snape! Open this bloody door!"

Snape had a scathing rejoinder on the tip of his tongue, but it died when he opened the door of his office to Lucius Malfoy. The man declared, breathlessly, "Dumbledore has Harry!"



Snape was momentarily frozen in place as Lucius continued, "I do not know what he means, Severus, but I caught a glimpse of the boy's face as we left his office and Harry is not at ease with the old man."

That was enough. Snape broke from his frozen posture and without replying to Lucius, broke into a run, headed for the Headmaster's office. Lucius knew that Snape would take care if there were any trouble, so he did not follow, but returned to his family.

Snape was barely breathing hard as he finally reached the door of the Headmaster's tower office. To his anger, it was tightly shut against him. Wielding his wand, he did his best to cool his temper as he used several spells to break through the locking wards that Dumbledore had put up when the Malfoys and Hermione had left the office. Snape wanted to break in, but he did not wish to show his emotions by allowing the door to be blown off its hinges.

As it was, when the door finally, and gently, swung open, he heard Harry declare, "The Philosopher's Stone? That's what the three-headed monster is protecting!"

"Ah, Severus! There you are!" The Headmaster showed no sign that he was disturbed by the interruption, or the fact that the younger wizard had broken through his simple locking spells. As the old man stood, he leaned over and absently patted Harry's knee before returning his full attention to his Potions instructor. He did not see Harry flinch back from the touch so strongly that he knocked the back of his head against the back of the chair.

"Headmaster," Snape bowed slightly. He was the perfect picture of calm, and not even a ragged breath betrayed the mad dash he'd just made from the dungeons, despite the fact that his lungs and heart were burning within his chest. "I do apologise for interrupting, but it seems that I was not informed that Mr. Potter had been summoned to your office. As he is one of my Snakes, I was... concerned that he might have gotten up to some mischief." Snape glanced over towards Harry who gave him a relieved smile. "Three headed monster, Mr. Potter?"

Harry slipped off his chair and scooted around the Headmaster until he was at Snape's side. Without even knowing that he was mirroring

the little boy's drawing, Snape draped one arm over Harry's shoulders, allowing Harry to lean in closer.

"Professor, the Headmaster was telling me a story about...!" Harry suddenly gripped Snape's arm as he caught that twinkling, glitter-edged glance from Dumbledore. The smile the old man sent his way, despite its supposed warmth, only chilled Harry to the bone. Harry had seen such an unspoken threat before; in his Uncle Vernon's eye the few times his teacher from Primary school had visited the Dursley home to speak about their 'odd' nephew. It clearly meant he was to keep quiet, or there would be consequences.

Snape caught the look the Headmaster gave Harry and understood it all too well. Ignoring it, he asked, "About the Philosopher's Stone?" Snape eyed the older wizard sharply. His gaze was accusing, though his expression remained neutral. "So I heard, Mr. Potter." Snape deftly interposed himself between the child and the Headmaster and gently extricated Harry from himself. "Have you had lunch today, Mr. Potter?"

Harry shook his head, slightly confused as to what was silently going on between the adults. He spoke softly, "Mr. Malfoy wanted the Headmaster to send me to the visitor's tower."

"Then you should go before they have to wait much longer," Snape gave the worried boy a very small smile that caused Harry to let out a breath of relief. "Once you are down the spiral staircase, summon a house elf and ask it to escort you to the visitor's tower. I'll be along shortly."

"Yes, sir," Harry nodded. He looked up at his teacher and saw that the stern and stoic expression familiar to all the students at Hogwarts had returned. Within the Dark Man's obsidian gaze, Harry found further assurance that all was well. With that, he turned, and did his best not to embarrass his Head of House by running. Once he left the Headmaster's office, though, Harry's heavily beating heart finally calmed itself down. Following his Head of House's instruction, Harry summoned a house elf and he was soon following it to the visitor's tower.

Snape turned back to the Headmaster when Harry had left the office. "The Philosopher's Stone, Headmaster?" asked Snape solemnly. "That is the artifact you brought into Hogwarts?"

"I ask you to remain silent about this, Severus," spoke the Headmaster gravely. The twinkle, of course, was long gone from his eyes, and Snape was sure he'd be reminded, once again, of his debt to Dumbledore.

"For what reason would you have, then, of telling Mr. Potter of the Stone's existence? And that blasted Cerberus? Mr. Potter is aware of Fluffy?" Snape couldn't help but snort at the incongruous name Hagrid had given the beast.

Dumbledore smiled dismissively and Snape could not fully repress the sneer that marred his expression. The Headmaster ignored it, though, as he explained, "It seems that Mr. Potter and Mr. Malfoy got themselves lost and found themselves up on the third floor corridor. They had hoped to use the only door they saw as a way back to the way they had come, but... well..."

"Fluffy," seethed Snape. "They could have been killed, Albus!" Snape's temper finally broke free as concern mixed with frustration. Why did the Headmaster speak as though this were some children's lark of an adventure? "Fluffy is not a benevolent creature!"

Dumbledore frowned at the younger man's temper, but did not correct him. "All you need know, Severus, is that the Stone is safe."

Snape wanted to gape at his Headmaster, but only tightened his scowl. "My concern is not for the Philosopher's Stone, Headmaster," he spoke slowly, as though trying to get a point across to a dimwit. "My concern is for the safety of the children."

Dumbledore eyed the Potions Master shrewdly, "Is it, Severus? You appear overly concerned about Mr. Potter, not your Snakes. Do you no longer view him with the same contempt you viewed his father?"

Snape glared. What had this do to with anything? Was Dumbledore trying to say something without saying anything? "My feelings towards James Potter have no bearing on how I treat the son and I am insulted that you believe it to be a factor." He did not admit that had the boy simply shown up at Hogwarts along with all the other little cretins, he would have seen James Potter, and only James. And that would have affected the way I would have treated the child, he thought to himself in shame. As it was, he not only saw James in

the child, but Lily, as well. Finally, he saw Harry in Harry; a unique child.

The Headmaster smiled sadly. "I do apologise, my boy. I can see that you have taken the boy under your wing as you do all of your Snakes." Dumbledore moved over to one of his bookshelves and began to run his long fingers over their bindings. "The boy is going to need someone he trusts, Severus."

"He should trust you, sir," Snape declared with care. The Headmaster's secrets and manipulations were frustrating him to no end. He felt a sourness in his mouth as he wondered if he would not only have to protect Harry from Death Eaters and the Dark Lord, but a barmy, old Headmaster as well.

Dumbledore turned away from his books and eyed Snape over the rims of his half-moon glasses. "I would wish the boy to trust me, Severus, but I can see in his gaze that he does not."

"Headmas... Albus... you know that I am pledged to protect the child, but how can I when I know the things I know?" Dumbledore quietly regarded the younger wizard. Snape continued, "You intend to send Har... Mr. Potter back into an abusive situation, you tell him of the Philosopher's Stone and... Bedeviled Merlin! Have you put the entire school in danger for some mad scheme?"

The Headmaster glared at his angry Potions instructor who had lost enough of his composure that he was yelling by the end of his tirade. "I do what must be done, Severus. As I always have. Do you truly believe that I wish to see Harry abused by his relatives?" Snape did not answer. He simply crossed his arms over his chest and scowled. Dumbledore sighed heavily. "So it appears you do."

For several minutes Dumbledore paced. Snape only watched. He remained, as a statue, neither offering nor asking, only waiting to see if the Headmaster might provide him with some clue as to what he was thinking.

When Snape had realised how he'd been manipulated by Dumbledore, and flat out lied to, it had hurt. It had sickened him to know what a fool he'd been all these years knowing that he'd been a free man. When it came down to it, though, Snape admitted to being

a willing sacrifice. He blamed himself for his only friend's death and, after rescuing Harry, he felt partly to blame there as well.

What angered Snape, now, was that it seemed the sacrifice was no longer his, but Harry's. There had to be more than just Blood Wards behind the Headmaster's insistence that Harry be returned to his relatives. There had to be some reason for telling Harry, an eleven year old child, about the Philosopher's Stone. And there had to be some reason for bringing that damn Stone to the school. Had not there ought to be a reason for any of this? Snape asked himself.

Just when Snape thought that nothing more was to be, or could be said, and he was planning on just leaving, Dumbledore cleared his throat.

"Harry cannot trust me, Severus, because, I do not trust him." Dumbledore ascended the stairs to his private chambers. Not once did he look over his shoulder to acknowledge the look of utter shock on Snape's face.

While Snape rescued Harry from the clutches of the Headmaster, Lucius was now in the visitor's quarters assigned to he and his wife for their weekend stay. He assured Narcissa that Snape was going to take care of Harry. Until Harry arrived, Lucius would have a much needed talk with his son.

Lucius shut the door to the bedroom and cast a Silencing Spell as his son scooted to a safe distance over by the bed. Draco's father leaned back against the closed door and crossed his arms over his chest. Draco watched as his father deliberately, and smoothly, sheathed his wand back into the hollow of his cane.

"Explain yourself, Draco," drawled Lucius, not yet looking at his son.

"I... well, there was... we did... but I... and Harry... uhm..." Draco looked up at his father who now had his grey eyes trained heavily upon his son. Draco swallowed. Slowly his hands went to protect his backside. Lucius was entirely aware of the movement and had not ruled out a possible spanking to get his son to grow up. He hoped, though, that he wouldn't have to resort to such a punishment.

Draco scuffed the carpet with the toe of his boot, then faced his father's gaze once more. He didn't want a spanking. He was a big boy, now. His father had told him so. And Draco really wanted to prove to his father that his judgement wasn't misplaced. It took every ounce of courage he had to not look down at the toes of his boots. With a deeply held breath he confessed, "I lost my temper, father."

Lucius nodded once. "What have I warned you about that temper of yours, Draco?"

"That it will always get me in trouble," he replied softly.

"And why would losing your temper cause you to get into trouble, Dragon?"

Draco sniffed and let out a sigh of relief. When his father used his nickname, it meant that his father's anger was dissipating. "Because when I lose my temper, I stop thinking, father."

Lucius moved to sit beside his son who now leaned against his father's thigh. Lucius didn't push his son away, but neither did he touch the boy. "There will always be people who anger you, Dragon, but if you allow your anger to explode and to take over everything it is they who are in control, not you. It is imperative that you not allow that. It is perfectly acceptable to be angry, but you must control it so that you are still in control of all your faculties."

"Father?" he asked in a small voice. "Are you going to spank me?"

Lucius allowed his stern gaze to linger upon his son a moment longer before freeing his son from it. "No, Dragon. You are too old for spankings and as you've been entirely truthful with me, I am pleased with you. You are growing up."

Draco let out a great breath of relief. "Am I too old for hugs, father?"

Lucius smiled and held his arms open. Draco embraced his father, hugging him tightly. Lucius' gloved hand cupped the back of his son's head. "Let us hope that you're never too old for hugs, Dragon."

Severus Snape didn't think he'd ever been so gobsmacked before in his life. After several long minutes, that might have only been seconds, the only thing he knew to do was to leave.

As he left the Headmaster's office and made his way to the visitor's tower, his mind was irreversibly numb. Snape wanted to think, or to shout, to throw things, or to allow his accidental magic to bring the castle down stone by stone.

He couldn't do anything but pretend that all was well.

Less than ten minutes after leaving the Headmaster's office, Snape entered the quarters assigned to the Malfoys for their weekend visit in the visitor's tower. He made polite greetings as he joined everyone for lunch.

Later, he'd be unable to recall what was for lunch. It had all tasted like sand.

At some point, amidst the children chattering animatedly, or Narcissa talking to Hermione, or Lucius going on about some party, Harry had drifted away from the group to join his teacher where he sat upon the sofa. Harry just simply sat next to the man, sensing quite correctly, that he was feeling immensely off-kilter. Snape emerged enough from his chaotic fugue to drape an arm over the child's shoulder and draw him to his side. As Harry's hand went to worry the buttons on his coat, Snape's long fingers rested against the boy's hand. With a soft sigh of a sigh, Harry leaned his head against his professor's chest; both not entirely realising that they were comforting each other.

Narcissa, engaged in a discussion with Hermione about etiquette and Wizarding customs, had looked up to see the Potions Master and Harry upon the sofa, quiet, lost perhaps, but content with each other. She caught her husband's eye and they shared a gaze of concern for the younger man.

A few hours later, Snape wasn't entirely aware that the Malfoys quarters had become quiet. Not until Lucius held a glass of fire whiskey in front of his face. Snape took the glass and easily drained it in one gulp. Lucius refilled the glass and then took a chair opposite his friend.

"Can you speak of it, Severus?" Lucius asked, doing his best to keep any concern he might have from his voice. He knew that his friend rarely admitted to any weakness and Snape was behaving as

though someone had given him a great shock that weakened him. As astute as his observation was, he was not prepared for what the younger man replied.

"Dumbledore does not trust Harry." Snape drank down the second whiskey and then stood. "We will speak after dinner. I need to sleep now." With a nod, the Potions Master turned on his heel, and departed.

Lucius found his wife seated upon a conjured chair by the lake. The day had been decently warm, but the seasons were changing and the chill would soon bring snow to Hogwarts.

Narcissa, seeing her husband, enlarged the chair she was in, and he sat down beside his wife, taking her gloved hands into his. The three friends were seated some distance away, but still in sight, talking together as if they were sharing some great secrets.

Lucius released one of his wife's hands and draped an arm over her shoulders until she leaned in contentment against his side.

"Was Severus ill?" asked Narcissa.

"I think so. He will not be joining us for dinner as he was in need of a lie-down. He and I will talk when he awakens." Lucius kissed his wife's brow before leaning back in the chair. Snape's last words echoed uneasily in his mind.

"Dumbledore does not trust Harry."

Saturday, Sept. 28, 1991 - That evening

"It's called Quidditch Little League," Hermione explained as she put a few croutons on her salad. Harry and Draco were intrigued because they thought that Hermione had something up her sleeve. The Malfoys, at first, listened politely.

"Draco, you know Roman Bosco?" she asked.

He nodded before taking a gulp of his pumpkin juice. "Yeah. I mean, yes. He played for the Chudley Cannons before retiring two years ago."



"Well, he's the player I read about in your Quidditch Monthly magazine," she smiled. Draco dragged his fork through his mashed potatoes. He rarely read his magazine unless the articles dealt with his current favourite players. "He moved to the States and he began the first Quidditch Little League for kids our age there." Hermione looked up guilelessly at Lucius. "Wouldn't it be great if we could have our own league here at Hogwarts, sir?"

Lucius chuckled at the girl and wiped his lips with his napkin. "Your delivery needs a bit of polish, but that was an excellent Slytherin maneuver, Miss Granger. A Quidditch Little League seems much more benign to sponsor than that blood... I mean," he inclined his head to his wife in apology for his almost crude language, "that blasted Tri-Wizard Tournament."

Hermione beamed at Lucius, then gave Harry and Draco, who each had an admiring look upon their faces, a wink. "I owled for more information, Mr. Malfoy," she added. "Should I send it to you?"

"Please do so, Miss Granger." He rose from the table and then leaned over to kiss his wife's cheek. "I am going to take a brief walk before meeting with Severus, my dear." He then gave each of the children a soft glare. "One pudding only."

Draco nodded. Hermione smiled, and Harry replied dutifully, "Yes, sir!"

Snape slept much better than he had expected, despite taking a liberal dose of Dreamless Sleep Potion. Upon waking, though, he had to face what the Headmaster had told him about Harry.

Rising from his bed he subjected himself to an almost cold shower in order to clarify his mind. Upon emerging from the cool water, he threw a fluffy towel around his waist and a second over his shoulders, and leaned towards his non-speaking, non-magical mirror for the second time that day.

Taking out his straight razor Snape tackled the stubble on his chin that was just beginning to appear. Normally he used a spell to charm away the stubble, but he needed the precise and dangerous risk of the straight razor. In minutes, with a steady hand, he was finished.

He sighed, rather too disappointed to see that he had not managed to slip once.

Leaving the bathroom behind, he quickly dressed and used a Drying Spell on his still wet hair. Just as he was about to leave his rooms to find Lucius, he stopped.

Harry had comforted me.

Dumbledore did not trust Harry.

"What in the name of Merlin are you afraid of, you old coot?" he demanded of no one as he stood in the middle of his living room.

A sharp knock on his door that led into a dungeon corridor announced that Snape would not have to go looking for Lucius. He waved his wand at the door and it opened, allowing the aristocrat into his living room.

"You look much improved, Severus," remarked Lucius as he held forth a bottle of elven brandy.

Snape took the bottle, decanted it while Lucius seated himself before the fire, and poured two measures of brandy into two crystal snifters. After he handed one glass to Lucius, he sat in a chair opposite the older wizard.

After a few delicate sips of the mellow liquor, Snape spoke darkly, "Do not ask me to explain what that old man meant, Lucius. I do not have the answer."

Lucius did not reply, nor did he press the younger man for details. When he was nearly halfway through his brandy, he spoke up, "I do have an answer for you, though, my friend."

Snape, whose attention had been on the flames in his Floo, centered his inquisitive attention upon Lucius. "To the matter of Harry and his relatives?"

Lucius nodded. "I spoke to my solicitor who has a contact in the Muggle world who did some research for me into Mr. Potter's situation. I think you'll be pleased to know that as Mr. Potter does have living relatives who... allow him living space, such as it is, the

guardianship that Dumbledore has over the child is fraudulent." Snape perked up at this news and Lucius gave him a satisfied smile.

"Technically, as the Headmaster of Hogwarts he has a responsibility to the child, however, he does not have the legal right to either detain the boy from visiting relatives or friends, nor has he any right to determine where the boy resides. As you are his Head of House, you have the legal right of In Loco Parentis, acting on behalf of the parents in much the same manner as Narcissa and I shall act on Miss Granger's behalf."

"What sort of guardianship does Dumbledore claim?" asked Snape.

"Godfather. When Sirius Black was arrested for the murders of those Muggles and Peter Pettigrew, Dumbledore stepped in as godfather to Harry Potter. His claim, at the time, was not disputed by the Ministry due to the chaos of the time, and for the simple fact that Dumbledore placed the baby with blood relatives. However," and here Lucius' smile was similar to that of the cat that ate the canary, "the Ministry is unaware of Mr. Potter's relatives and are under the impression that Dumbledore has directly seen to the raising of the boy."

Snape's eyes glittered sharply and he scowled. He finished his brandy. "Am I able to adopt Harry?"

"You are," Lucius smiled sublimely. "You have one of two ways to accomplish this. Either you can get the Dursleys to give up all rights to Mr. Potter, or you may involve the Muggle authorities in a child abuse investigation. I would suggest the former as the other could involve the Ministry as well and you'd be tied up in court for a very long time. This could also mean that the Ministry could legally get their hands on Mr. Potter, thus endangering his life."

"I have the feeling that the Dursleys will not hesitate in giving up their nephew." Snape's smile was thin, but no less satisfied than Lucius'.

"I must mention one other thing my contacts in the Ministry discovered, Severus." He swirled the remainder of his brandy in his snifter for a moment before continuing. "An abuse report was intercepted from an Oculist Healer by the name of Dymshank. He has been appropriately thanked and assured that the WCS will look

into the abuse. However, that report will not reach them unless it is necessary.

Severus nodded. He had forgotten about that report and silently thanked his friend for having found it.

After a moment, Lucius gave the younger wizard a conspiratorial smile. "Tell me, Severus, what do you think the Headmaster might say to a Quidditch Little League for the first years?"

A/N: Such a long day, wasn't it? What's next - Quidditch Little League? And, what mischief is Quirrell up to? Snape meets the Dursleys? Stay tuned to this dungeon for the next, probably long, chapter!

Sunday, Sept. 29, 1991

Harry woke with a scream at four in the morning. As he looked around the dorm and at Draco, sleeping the sleep of innocents, Harry wondered once again if his screams had merely been in his awful nightmare. Draco hadn't awakened the last two nights this horrible nightmare had terrified him awake. He would have stayed put in his bed, but his stomach rebelled at the awful images and sensations of the nightmare. He ran into the bathroom, unaware of the tingly sensation of a spell ending as he left his bed.

A few minutes later Draco groggily lifted his head from where it was buried amongst his two pillows. He could hear retching coming from the bathroom and so he sat up.

"Harry?" Draco looked over at his friend's bed to find it empty. When he heard sobs Draco shuffled out of bed and padded into the bathroom. He found Harry curled up in a corner between the shower and the toilet, his arms around his knees, and his head on his arms. Draco knelt down, ignored the flinching, and touched his friend's hands. "You want me to get Professor Snape?" he asked gently.

Harry didn't raise his head, but he nodded miserably. Draco patted his hand. "I'll be right back!"

Draco jumped to his feet and ran out of the dorm to Prefect Billock's room. His frantic knocking was answered rather quickly by the seventh year. Billock saw Draco and had no hesitation. He belted his dressing gown, Summoned his slippers, and sent Draco back to Harry.

When Snape arrived ten minutes later, the man was still in his black silk pyjamas, black velvet dressing gown, and black slippers. He saw Draco kneeling in front of Harry giving what comfort he could by patting the still weeping boy's hands.

Snape cast a Cushioning Charm and then knelt down. "Harry?"

Draco stepped lithely aside as Harry shot to his feet and nearly threw himself at his teacher. He was mumbling something, but since his face was against Snape's chest he couldn't understand the child. He rubbed the small boy's back and carded his fingers through

Harry's hair. At some point he was sure that Harry mumbled the word, 'daddy'.

"Hush child," he spoke very softly into Harry's ear. "Daddy's here. Shhhh." A rather wide-eyed and surprised look from Draco told the Head of Slytherin House that he'd not spoken softly enough.

It was nearly a half-hour later before Harry was calmed down. He now sat on his bed beside Snape. Draco had been ordered to go and shower so the two could talk.

"Can you tell me about the nightmare, Harry?" asked Snape as he brushed the boy's lengthy fringe off his forehead. The boy was going to need a trim soon.

"It was the same one, sir," he hiccuped and then sniffled and wiped his nose on his sleeve. Snape simply Scourgified the sleeve and conjured a handkerchief to give Harry. "I don't want these anymore!" He pushed his head against Snape's chest and Snape automatically drew him closer. "It's too scary!" he mumbled into Snape's chest.

"I will not allow this to continue, child," Snape spoke soothingly. "There is a discipline I have been meaning to teach Draco and I am sure it will help you as well. Although I had planned to begin next week, we shall start this evening." He cupped Harry's chin in his palm so he could see into the child's eyes. He gave him a small smile. "Now, would you like to try and go back to..." Harry shook his head vehemently. "All right, then. Get cleaned up, and if Draco hasn't gone back to bed, come to the Potions classroom. You two may assist me in getting a few ingredients ready for Monday."

"All right, sir," Harry sighed in relief as he slid off the edge of his bed. Snape stood and was about to turn away, when Harry caught him with a quick hug around his waist and a whispered, "Thank you for coming!" He then raced away into the bathroom to take his shower.

Draco, far too curious about what he'd heard his Head of House say to Harry decided not to go back to bed. As Harry dressed himself, Draco made his bed by smoothing the blankets to reduce as many wrinkles as possible. He then watched as Harry did a much neater job on his bed; tucking in the sheets, making the blanket and coverlet both smooth after he fluffed them, and lastly he plumped up

his pillows and placed them precisely next to each other against the headboard.

"He's not really your dad, you know," stated Draco as he leaned against one of his bedposts. Harry didn't say anything, nor did he turn to look at his friend. "Just because I said he's sort of like a dad doesn't make him yours," persisted Draco.

"I know that!" snapped Harry. He stomped toward the door, yanked it open, and headed down toward the common room. Draco scrambled to follow his friend.

"Harry! Harry!" Draco caught up with Harry halfway across the common room. "Hey! Don't be mad. I wasn't trying to be mean. I just... well, Snape called himself... that. You know? Why?"

They both stepped through Salazar Slytherin's portrait. Harry didn't reply until they were halfway down the corridor. "I think he said that 'cause I was... scared. And," his voice dropped down to a near whisper, "I called him da... that first."

Draco glanced at Harry in surprise. "Why did you do that, Harry?"

Harry could only shrug. He was too embarrassed to tell his friend how he'd pleaded with Professor Snape to keep someone... an evil voice... from... from killing him.

"What do you think Professor Snape is going to have us help him with?" Harry asked in an attempt to change the subject.

Draco saw the attempt for what it was and let it go. He'd fallen behind Harry, so he walked a little faster to catch up with him. "Maybe he's going to have us prepare something gross! Like newt eyes!"

"Ewww! Really?" Harry screwed up his face exaggeratedly.

Draco laughed. "Or, maybe Mung fish lungs! Or Codswallow eggs!" Draco suddenly sprinted ahead of Harry and Harry dashed, now laughing, after his friend.

Snape had been pleased with his two assistants. He'd had them preparing Armadillo Bile for Monday's class in which they would be

brewing Pepper-Up Potion, again. Too many first year students had failed the first time.

Draco and Harry had giggled, for a bit, over handling the slimy bile as they filtered it through a silk filter, but then they had both calmed down. The quiet was pleasant, but perhaps it had been a bit much for Harry. He began to ask questions about the Armadillo Bile and the filtering process. When he saw that both boys paid attention to the answer of their first question, Snape dropped into lecture-mode. The three were content until time came to clean up and head for breakfast.

The two friends expected to be sent to the Great Hall, but Snape held them back. "Would you two care to join me for breakfast?" he asked.

"Sure!" "Yeah!" they both agreed.

Snape escorted his two Snakes to his office where he Floo'd the kitchen and had breakfast delivered to them.

Snape had cleared a portion of his desk for an impromptu breakfast table. For a moment all was quiet as they ate hungrily. Then, Snape took up his mug of coffee, and began to drink it.

"Can either of you gentlemen tell me what Occlumency is?" he asked, savouring the rich bitterness of his preferred brew.

"No, sir," Harry replied.

"I think I know, sir," volunteered Draco. At Snape's nod, he continued, "It's a mental discipline where you know how to empty your mind of all thought."

"Very close, but not quite, Mr. Malfoy." At the boy's moue of disappointment, Snape gave a small smile; an upturn at the corner of his mouth. "You don't empty your mind of thought, but you hide them so that someone skilled in Legilimens cannot see them."

"Mind reading?" asked Harry incredulously.

"Legilimency is often mistaken for mind reading, but it is much more complicated. Reading a person's mind is not an easy matter. No one



person's thoughts are organised quite like yours are." Both boys frowned.

Snape leaned forward and Summoned a piece of parchment. He drew a simple image of a hippogriff on it. He then tore the parchment apart and held out the torn pieces. "This is your thought of a hippogriff you met." He arranged the pieces so that the hippogriff now resembled a bad Picasso drawing. "This might be the way Draco's mind stores the image."

He then scooped the pieces back together and crushed them in his fist so that only a few edges showed. "This might be the way Harry's mind stores the image."

He then opened his hand so the pieces sat upon his palm. With his wand he carefully cast a Blue Flame. The pieces of parchment were quickly reduced to ash without injuring Snape's hand. "This is how a skilled Occlumens might hide his thoughts."

Draco's eyes lit up in appreciation. Harry gasped, "Wow! Who are you hiding your thoughts from, though, sir?"

Snape vanished the ash and its smudged residue from his hand. "You are hiding your thoughts from a Legilimens. A Legilimens is able to step into your mind with their own and search through your memories, or recent thoughts. If they are skilled enough, they can also feel your emotions."

"That's creepy," shuddered Harry.

Draco nodded in agreement. "That's why my father always tells me to never look my enemy in the eye," added Draco.

"Why is that?" asked Harry, a slight frown on his face.

Draco turned to Harry, his tone somewhat lofty as he explained, "That's how a Legilimens gets into your mind. They look at you and go through your eyes."

Snape watched as Harry's frown deepened. The boy then looked up at him. "Does it hurt?"

"Legilimens?" Snape asked, wondering where this was leading. Harry nodded. "It can. A Legilimens that is not skilled in penetrating the mind without the knowledge of the one whose mind he is looking into, can cause that person pain."

"A headache?" asked Harry. "Would it sound like bees in your head, too?"

Snape sat up straighter and put down his mug of coffee. "Harry, do you think someone tried to Legilimens you?"

He nodded slowly. "I think so. Do you know if the Headmaster is a Legilimancer?"

"Legilimens," Snape automatically corrected as a sliver of anger sliced through his chest. That bastard! "Is that what happened to you when the Headmaster spoke to you alone yesterday, Harry?"

"Yeah... I think it happened twice." Harry leaned back against his chair and frowned as he recalled yesterday. "Professor Dumbledore was looking at my eyes and it was kind of hard not to look away because I thought he might think that was rude. But, then I heard this buzzing in my head and then like seconds later my brain began to hurt. A lot."

Snape scowled. The Headmaster Legilimensed Harry and hurt him! And he doesn't trust Harry? Snape wondered what the Headmaster had been looking for. Had he found something, and that's why he didn't trust the boy?

"Did I do something wrong, sir?" Harry asked worriedly as he saw the anger on his teacher's face.

Snape sighed, "No, Harry. You did nothing wrong. Bring your chair over here. I would like to test something."

Harry got up from his chair, picked it up, and carried it over so that it was on his teacher's side of the desk. Snape adjusted it so Harry would be facing him. He then bade the boy to sit back down.

"Now, Harry," Snape said as he tilted up the boy's head so he could see into those deep emerald eyes of Lily's. "I want to look into your mind but I'll not look at any memories you don't wish me to see."

"Ookay," Harry agreed hesitantly.

"I need you to think about how you were feeling yesterday..." Snape began but was interrupted.

"Is this gonna hurt, Professor?" Harry asked timidly.

"I will try not to hurt you, but if my theory is correct, you may get a headache. I will get you a potion for that, though. All right?" Harry nodded in relief. "Good boy. Don't relax. Remember how you felt yesterday. If it helps think of me as the Headmaster." He then whispered under his breath, "Legilimens!"

Snape was in darkness at first. But then he was able to orientate himself by an odd sort of light coming from his left : horizontal stripes of light. In the dark he felt cramped and the feeling was made worse by all the cardboard boxes that surrounded him. He took a step back and bumped into a box. Upon touching it he heard the sound of bees buzzing. Something felt wrong about the buzzing. It was slow as though pushing through molasses. He placed his hand against the box and something oozed from a lower corner.

"Aunt P'tuna? Auntie, I don't feel so good. Can I have some mecidine?"

It was the cupboard that Snape had rescued the boy from. He lay on his side huddled beneath a threadbare blanket, shivering. His face was crusted with tears and mucus from congestion. His arm was over his stomach and Snape was certain by the child's colour that he was running a fever.

"Please, Aunt P'tuna!" he cried.

The cupboard door snapped open and Petunia's horsey face peered in disgust at the small boy. "Here!" she snapped. "Keep quiet you freak! We're trying to have a nice evening!"

Harry ducked as a bottle of aspirin hit his head. The bottle of cough syrup fell on a portion of his miserable excuse for a bed.

Snape yanked his hand away from the box. He couldn't force Harry to relive anymore of that memory. He could sense that Harry was

feeling distressed, but the boy did nothing to keep Snape from continuing in his search.

Another box fell in front of him and instinctively Snape reached down to pick it up. At once he was overwhelmed by a much more recent memory.

Dumbledore conjured his most grandfatherly of smiles and his blue eyes twinkled as he picked up the tin of sweets. "Do have a sherbet lemon, Harry."

Harry stared down at the tin that held little lemon shaped sweet. He had to admit they were mouth-watering, but he could not forget the slight, worried shakes of the heads from both Draco and his father. When the Headmaster brought the tin closer, Harry only hesitated for a second before taking one of the sweets and pretending to pop it into his mouth. Harry was sure the older man didn't see that he had palmed the lemon sweet. A minute later he hid it within a fold of his school robe because he couldn't get to his pocket. It had gotten sticky from his sweaty palm, so he knew it would stick to the fabric.

Clever boy, Harry, mused Snape. He had learnt, long ago when he was still a student, that the Headmaster always kept a tin of sherbet lemon drops that were laced with Veritaserum and Calming Potion.

Leaving the memory, Snape touched another box. This time the buzzing sound was accompanied by anger.

No. Not anger. Hatred. White hot hatred. It was coming from the box. He moved to another and the buzzing sound faded. As he touched another box he felt not anger or hatred this time, but soul deep sadness. He ripped his hand away.

These were not just Harry's memories in these boxes, but emotions as well.

Snape withdrew from the boy's mind just as Harry fell forward in an almost faint. Snape caught him and Harry steadied himself by anchoring his hands against his teacher's forearms.

"Do you have a headache, Harry?" Snape asked quietly. Harry nodded, so Snape Summoned a Migraine Potion. The ex-spy had had to recover too many times to count from the Dark Lord's

Legilimens attacks. He had Harry drink a small portion of the potion and the boy was soon breathing a sigh of relief.

"I'm sorry, sir," Harry nearly mumbled.

"You have nothing to be sorry for, Harry," admonished Snape gently. "Feeling better?"

"Yeah," Harry whispered drawing in a welcome breath of air.

"What was it like, Harry?" asked Draco with such enthusiasm that it dissipated Harry's embarrassment.

"Weird," he mumbled. He then cleared his throat. "Like a swarm of bees stuck in my head until it felt like they got out, and I saw yesterday just as clear as... as... uhm... yesterday." He felt no need to mention the first memory, but he felt an odd ache in his heart as the memory of that day, when he was only five, he had gotten so terribly sick. He knew the thing he wanted most, to be held until the achiness passed, would never happen. Shyly he glanced up at Snape.

Snape was caught off guard by the deep longing that was suddenly met by his own gaze. He knew that the memory of the boy having been sick, and alone, was uppermost in his mind. Warmth for the small, once so very alone and afraid little boy, filled his dark gaze, and Harry smiled.

"Sounds wicked!" nodded Draco.

Snape disapproved of Draco's outburst. He scowled at them both. "To have your mind unwillingly shared by another is not 'wicked', Mr. Malfoy. To have someone within your mind, without your permission is tantamount to rape." Neither boy needed that explained as Harry's colour in his cheeks faded, and Draco gulped audibly.

The Potions Master realised he probably shouldn't have said it just that way with Harry in the room because the boy's skin had turned ashen as he reconsidered what the Headmaster had done to him.

"He... he..." Harry stuttered frantically.

Snape caught Harry's chin between his thumb and forefinger and held it, forcing the boy to look up at him. "Listen carefully to me. What I found in your mind was a bit disorganised, but we can fix that. However, the Headmaster is not a very good Legilimens and what you do have I am certain was enough to keep him out of your thoughts. He failed, Harry. Together," he glanced over at Draco to include him in that sentiment, "the three of us will make sure that the Headmaster can never do anything like that again without your knowledge. All right?"

Harry nodded, but he was still upset at the implication of what the Headmaster had tried to do to him. Snape sighed, and gathered the boy into a brief embrace. He was a little surprised when Draco, who had understood as well what the Headmaster of their school had done to Harry, came over and patted his friend firmly on the back.

Draco whispered solemnly, "Don't ever let him look through your eyes again, Harry. And, I'll always stick with you if that old wizard tries anything else, okay?"

Harry nodded against Snape's chest, but turned his head enough so he could smile gratefully at his friend.

Snape eased Harry back into his chair and then rose from his. "Come with me, you two. Harry, you need some chamomile tea. Draco, would you like a cup of mint tea?"

"Yes, sir!" Draco agreed. "Can we have some tea cakes, sir?" asked Draco slyly.

The Head of Slytherin House regarded his wily Snake for a moment, then nodded. "Just this once, you may each have two." That concession had them both smiling as they followed Snape through a hidden door and into his private quarters.

Snape had the boys help him with the tea preparation. He set out the tea things; the old China tea set that had once been his mother's as the water heated in the cherry red tea kettle on top of the iron stove. When it was Harry's turn to steep the tea, Draco went to the Floo and ordered some small cakes for each of them to go with the tea. Snape made a smaller serving of mint tea for Draco. Snape then took the tea set out to his living room, had the boys seat themselves on the sofa in front of the Floo, and he poured the tea.

Harry wrapped his hands around his cup of chamomile tea, blew across the steaming surface, and breathed in the clarifying, summery scent. It made him smile and let out a breath of relief.

Snape sipped at his tea as he watched Harry surreptitiously. Without even knowing what he was doing, Harry had been locking away his worst memories where he couldn't relive them. A facet of Occlumency, but not a very organised, nor a healthy one. It was the latter that caused Snape the most concern. Harry had locked away pain, sadness, disappointments, and more. He had not truly dealt with those feelings. It explained why he was having flashback-like symptoms when he was confronted with a trigger; such as the one sided fist fight he'd had with Draco. It also explained his nightmares. Well, some of the nightmares. Nothing, yet, explained what had happened in Quirrell's class (and the man had stuttered so much as he tried to relate his side later that same day that Snape had been hopelessly lost), nor did it explain the most recent, and terribly realistic nightmares.

After tea, and extracting a promise from Harry that he wouldn't miss lunch, Snape released the boys to take care of any homework they had left for the weekend, or to watch Quidditch practice. As for Snape, he draped a cloak over his shoulders and put the warm hood up. He was going to visit Hagrid.

As Snape expected, it was a cool and breezy day out. Warm though his cloak was, he needed to cast a Warming Charm and slip on a pair of gloves.

The Potions Master then strode down the hill toward a narrow path that had been worn into the ground by countless students that had visited Hagrid in the past.

Smoke curled up from the chimney of the hut and Snape could oversee the large pumpkin patch. Although only half the size, the pumpkins Hagrid was growing for Halloween were nearly half his height. They sprawled within an enclosure created by stacks of hay bales. Crows and chickens occupied the hay bales picking out feed that Hagrid had thrown there earlier.

The half-giant himself was seated on his narrow porch, with a long, elven pipe in his mouth. Green smoke puffed up from the pipe as

Hagrid drew in the fragrant, elf grown tobacco. He nodded to the Potions Master.

"Winter's a'comin, Perfessor!" Hagrid greeted. Fang, who'd been sitting next to his master. Tumbled down from the stoop and greeted the human with an affectionate head butt to the front of his thighs. Fang, who identified humans by their various scents, could always smell the spicey, mossy flora of the forest upon the man's robes. Thus, to Fang, he was 'Flowers'. It was probably a good thing Snape wasn't aware of this. Knowing his nickname was 'Flowers' would do little for his reputation.

Fang leaned against Flowers, snuffling the many pockets in the human's cloak. One pocket, he knew, always held a treat just for him.

As the great boarhound sniffed Snape's cloak, his hand reached into an inner pocket and drew out a hard biscuit for Fang. They were Muggle-made dog biscuits of a variety of flavors. Snape bought them just for the big dog who always seemed much happier after getting one to chew on. At the very least, Snape figured they were more nutritious than the rock cakes Hagrid always tried to serve everyone that Fang wound up with because they were too tough on ordinary teeth.

"Hello, Hagrid," Snape greeted as he moved closer to the large man. He then turned slightly to face the Forbidden Forest. "Has all been well in the forest, Hagrid? I'm looking forward to harvesting fresh snowdrops after the first snow."

Hagrid's brow furrowed. "Couldn't advise it, Perfessor," and Hagrid clucked his tongue as he scratched his shaggy beard.

"Is something the matter?" asked the Potions Master and ex-spy.

"Unicorns." The big man let out a huge sigh of sadness and frustration. Snape felt his spine stiffen in warning.

"What's wrong with the unicorns?" He did not have to feign worry since he was truly worried and could tell that the half-giant was as well.



"Found a third one dead t'is mornin'." Hagrid shook his head. "Ah spoke with Bane, 'ead of the Centaurs? Can't give me much clue, but it's no' good, Professor. Th' forest is dangerous, but not evil, ya know? Bane as much as said as it's evil what's in there."

"The death of a unicorn never bodes well, Hagrid," Snape agreed softly. "Do you think the rest of the unicorns will leave?"

Hagrid shrugged. "Can't say, Perfessor. Whatever's in there 'as got everythin' all touchy like. Thestrals is off their feed, too. Lost a little 'un, too. Poor babe." The big man took out a large, checkered handkerchief and dabbed at his eyes as he sniffled. He then blew his nose.

"What does the Headmaster say to all this, Hagrid?" Snape questioned shrewdly.

"Jus' asked me to keep an eye on what I could an' t' be careful, like," Hagrid let out a worried sigh. "Good man, that Dumbledore," he said wistfully. Then, Hagrid turned away from the sight of the Forbidden Forest and looked down at Snape. "D'ye think as Fluffy's in any sort of danger, Professor?"

Snape bit back the snort he almost let go. Hagrid, who seemed to have no true sense of a magical beast's danger, was genuinely worried for the great Cerberus. "I've no doubt that... Fluffy..." Snape couldn't stop the sneer, though. "That beast will be able to take care of itself, Hagrid." Snape drew his cloak a bit tighter about his body and turned back toward the castle. "Hagrid, would you mind letting me know, as well, if there is more trouble with the forest?"

Hagrid nodded. "Will do, Perfessor."

Snape withdrew another biscuit for Fang before beginning the long walk back up the twisted, narrow path. He paused at the crest to look over his shoulder out over the forest and shivered.

Something was killing the unicorns and Harry was dreaming of it. With a shiver, Snape renewed his Warming Charm and spun back to the path ahead of him.

That evening, Snape left his quarters to take his two Snakes, Harry and Draco, through their first Occlumency exercise. As he entered

the common room he was pleased to see that most of his Snakes had their noses in books or were working on last minute homework. There were smaller groups playing chess or Exploding Snap or discussing Quidditch.

The first years that were still in the common room were cleaning up their messes and were heading to their dorms in order to comply with their bedtime curfew.

"Professor Snape?" Snape turned to center his attention on a little, red-headed girl with blue eyes. She was a third year by the name of Alison Baddell.

"Miss Baddell?" he asked, lacing his fingers loosely behind his back. "Is there something you need assistance with?"

"Yes, sir. In Transfiguration we're exploring the theory behind organic versus inorganic Transfiguration and, I think I almost have it, but..." she handed him her essay so far. "Would you look it over, sir? Please?"

Snape took the parchment and he quickly skimmed the essay. He then went over to the shelf of books and took one down. He handed both the essay and the book back to Alison. "I believe that what you're looking for can be found in this text, Miss Baddell."

She eyed the title of the book and then smiled. "Thank you, professor!" Alison settled back into her chair and began reading the book.

Snape headed up the spiral staircase to the dorm that Harry and Draco shared. He knocked twice upon the closed door. From within he heard a shuffling noise and a muffled, 'Wait!' A minute later the door was opened by Draco wearing his satin green pyjamas, slippers, and matching green velvet dressing gown.

"Hi, professor!" he greeted. "Harry's brushing his teeth." Draco motioned his teacher into the dorm and Snape closed the door, casting a quick Silencing Charm.

"Is all of your weekend homework finished, Mr. Malfoy?" asked Snape as he settled himself in one of two chairs by the fireplace.

"Yes, sir. Harry and I just got our Charms essays finished. We have an exam on Tuesday that we have to study for tomorrow." Draco sat on the edge of his bed. "Professor," Draco paused and his feet began to kick the bed frame. "If Hermione got sorted in Slytherin, would she be all right? I mean... with her not being..."

"Pureblood?" Snape's voice was cautious.

"Yes, sir. You see, Harry and I would like for her to be in Slytherin cause she's dead smart, you know?"

Snape smirked and drawled, "I believe I have noticed that."

Draco smiled, "Yeah, you have. But, well, what do you think, sir?" Draco asked.

Snape steepled his fingertips over his abdomen. "Miss Granger might feel some resistance to her heritage, but if she were Sorted into our House, I would emphasize to everyone that she would be part of our family."

Draco nodded. "We Snakes stick together."

"That we do."

"Hello, Professor Snape," said Harry as he walked out of the bathroom.

"Good evening, Mr. Potter. Mr. Malfoy tells me that all your homework is finished?" Harry smiled. "Very good." He straightened. "All right, gentlemen, into bed and get comfortable on your backs."

The two friends scrambled to obey and soon they were both nestled warmly under their covers and were lying on their backs. Snape took out his wand and extinguished the torches that lit the room. The only light came from the flames in the fireplace.

With his voice at its most deepest and compelling, Snape began the lesson, "Occlumency is the ability to hide your thoughts, your emotions, from someone else; especially a Legilimens. It will help you in having a more precise control over your outward emotions and your body language. Patience is required in this discipline and

so we will begin with the building of your shields; the clearing of your mind."

"How do we do that?" asked Harry from the shadows.

"Hush, Harry. Just allow me to speak. If you have questions, save them for our next lesson. Draco, no falling asleep, yet," reminded Snape.

"I'm awake, professor."

"Good boy. Now, both of you close your eyes. The clearing of your mind is not a complete erasure of your thoughts. You clear your mind by imagining a place that is pleasant and calming. You must concentrate upon it in order to make it as real as the stone of the castle that surrounds you." Snape paused, listening to the breathing of his two students. He could hear in their breathing, how it was now a bit staccato, that they were concentrating on their task. He lowered the timbre of his voice and continued, "Allow your place to drift around you. Don't force it. It takes time and patience to build it so do not worry if the edges might be blurry or if some aspect is missing..."

Snape did not stop speaking in a gentle, hypnotic voice until he heard the breathing of Draco and Harry deepen into sleep. He rose, perfectly silently, checked each child, and then left in the same, silent manner.

Monday, Sept. 30, 1991

Monday morning brought September to a close and restlessness to all the classes. Snape was often chided by his colleagues for the amount of points he always took and what they considered an excessive amount of detentions. That Monday, all the teachers were taking points and handing out detentions like they were sweets.

Snape had given detentions to all three Weasleys. Although Fred and George were his most creative Potions students, they could also be the most disruptive with the amount of pranks they played on their fellows. He'd learned in their first year that setting them the task of washing out cauldrons or glass phials by hand did nothing to curb their prankster natures. Nor did having them prepare some of the worst ingredients imaginable deter them.

Deciding that it was better to have the Weasley twins as allies instead of enemies, Snape took the two boys in hand, and their talents at Potions, and put them to work during detentions with advanced Potions instruction. It wasn't easy work, and he was no less strident with them in detention than he was in class. Sometimes they simply failed, sometimes spectacularly so (he'd nearly had his head taken off by an Erumpent Fluid charged cauldron that had gotten airborne two years ago), and then there were their successes. Snape hated to admit it, at least to the twins, but they were brilliant when they put their mind to a Potion. It was a pity that they only thought of turning their potions into a useless prank.

Despite the fact that he didn't, quite, like the Weasley twins, out of all the detentions, theirs was the most tolerable to face. It was why he'd put their detention for Friday, after dinner, for having used their newest invention – Fuzzy Pills – in class. Their stunt had turned his entire fifth year class into a class of fuzzy, multi-coloured students.

According to Minerva the twins, Fred and George, had stopped their pranks on the Granger girl. Pranksters though they were, the two boys were not malicious sorts. They had simply chosen to ignore the girl. Her dorm mates had stopped their pranks as well, but Snape could clearly see that the shunning she received from her four roommates was much more a public display than anything else. Their noses went up in the air and they always turned away if she was near. In his class, he often had to take points from the waspish girls as they constantly twittered little insults to each other as they glanced, supposedly without his notice, towards the bushy-haired girl. Snape could hardly help himself when once or twice, his wand had twitched sending a Pinching Hex at the vile clique.

Snape, who was currently at his imposing classroom desk, stared down at the youngest Weasley whom he had just separated from his two cohorts. Ronald Weasley was a child Snape believed he could truly despise. The boy was an out and out bully who had taken under his wing Dean Thomas and Seamus Finnegan (said cohorts); not an individual thought between those two. If it was possible, they were simple thugs who were worse than Crabbe and Goyle.

Weasley, that moron, had decided it might be 'fun' to throw an entire sprig of mint leaves in Draco Malfoy's Pepper-Up Potion. The stupid boy had obviously not paid attention to the lecture in the last lesson about the inadvisability of mixing mint and Armadillo Bile together.

Pepper-Up Potion was a basic potion for a first year student to master but this class of Gryffindors and Slytherins caused Snape to want to tear his hair out by the end of the class. There were too many students in the class that just didn't seem to get it. Out of all of them, though, Neville Longbottom was hands down the worst because he just simply wouldn't read.

It wasn't a complaint that was singular to Snape. He'd heard similar complaints from the boy's other teachers, with the exception of Professor Sprout. The boy had a natural talent in growing things, so that's what he concentrated on and already the boy was doing well in Herbology. Snape only wished the boy would apply the same attention to his Potions textbook otherwise, the Potions Master worried that he'd be looking at five years of bad potions, wasted ingredients, and exploding cauldrons. There was no way the boy would be in his NEWTs class!

So, Snape scowled over his students, Longbottom might waste ingredients and destroy cauldrons, but he doubted that the Longbottom boy was so stupid that he'd murder his entire class of yearmates. Just thinking of it made his scowl darker, and a few students who looked up just then put their eyes immediately back upon their work.

Like a cobra, Snape's arm shot out and he caught the Weasley boy's arm by the wrist. In the boy's hand was a sprig of mint.

"Ow!" complained the Gryffindor with a scowl as he tried to release his wrist from his teacher's iron grip.

"Mr. Weasley," intoned Snape in that dark voice of his that bode ill for whomever it was aimed at. "Can you tell me what the result would be if you put that entire sprig of mint into Mr. Malfoy's potion at this point in the brewing?"

Ronald's eyes flitted angrily toward Draco as if him being caught was was the Slytherin boy's fault and he expected him to answer. Draco had listened to the lecture, and the one Snape had given that early, Sunday morning, but he just sneered at the youngest Weasley.

"Obviously you do not know the answer," Snape's voice cut sharply, "or you wouldn't have attempted such a suicidal stunt." Snape

dropped the boy's wrist and snatched the mint sprig from his fingers. "Thirty points from Gryffindor and a week's worth of detention, Mr. Weasley." He then turned on the boy and gave him an evil smirk, "With Filch."

"Blood...!" Ronald's imprecation was cut off as Dean Thomas slapped a hand over his mouth.

Before Dean could say anything, as Snape walked toward the front of the class he smoothly intoned, "And another ten points for language, Mr. Weasley."

"Good going, you prat!" hissed Lavender Brown, who was usually one of the redhead's admirers.

Snape whirled sharply at his desk and pinned a stony gaze upon Miss Brown, who gulped audibly. "Would anyone like to tell me the answer to my question?" When no one raised a hand, Snape moved his gaze to Hermione. He gave her a thin smile that some children called his 'sour stomach smile'. There was encouragement in his eyes, though, that smoothed Snape's expression. "Miss Granger? Would you enlighten us, perhaps?"

Hermione smiled nervously, then replied with confidence, "The whole mint sprig would react with the Armadillo Bile causing poisonous fumes."

"Five points, Miss Granger." He gave the girl a nod of approval and she grinned happily at Draco and Harry. Meanwhile, Snape returned his dead-eye gaze back to Ronald Weasley. "Congratulations, Mr. Weasley. You nearly killed all of your classmates. A pity you wouldn't have survived for a stint in Azkaban."

Snape was pleased to see that the boy paled suitably.

The Potions Master was not at all pleased that the Weasley boy kept shooting dark glares towards Miss Granger. Perhaps he had erred in allowing Miss Granger to give the damning answer. Weasley appeared to blame her for his loss of points and detention. It would not go well with the boy if he tried to exact retribution, Snape decided. He would make sure that Filch understood to make the boy's detention as unpleasant as possible. The smile Snape smiled,

was a deadly grimace, that fortunately no one, not even Ronald Weasley, saw.

Potions class finally ended and the students brought their samples of Pepper-Up Potion to Snape's desk. He had selected the potions of three students to be bottled for the Infirmary. Unsurprisingly to Snape, those three had been Hermione, Harry, and Draco, his best students.

Longbottom, unarguably his worst student, didn't blow up or melt his cauldron but he had somehow produced a tarry substance that smelled as foul as it had had to Vanish the sludge before the stench of it alone made the entire class pass out, or worse, vomit from the odour.

As the students were shoving books and parchment, quills and ink bottles into bookbags, Snape stopped Harry. "Mr. Potter? A moment, if you would?" He saw Draco hovering uncertainly near his friend. "To your study group, Mr. Malfoy. Mr. Potter will be along when I have finished speaking to him."

Draco finished putting his stuff into his bookbag, and gave Harry a nod before making his way out of the Potions classroom.

Harry put down his bookbag and sat back down at his desk as Snape straightened the samples for today. Snape picked up one phial, swirled its contents, and scowled as the liquid within turned from grey to pearly blue. He then held it out towards Harry. "Mr. Potter, can you tell me what is wrong with this sample?"

Harry tilted his head sideways at the phial and then frowned at it as he tried to recall all of the lectures he'd heard so far. "Too much of... something, sir, but I'm not sure which ingredient."

Snape smirked. "A slight trick question, Mr. Potter. All the ingredients are correct, but the potion was kept boiling too long."

Harry smiled in admiration. "Did you learn that in Potions class here, Professor?"

Snape put down the sample with the others and moved from his desk to one beside his Snake. He had to enlarge the desk so it



would accommodate his adult size before he seated himself on the narrow and uncomfortable bench.

"My mother taught me most of the finer aspects of Potions and when to gather fresh ingredients," Snape said, doing his best to keep the tightness from his throat. Any mention of his mother was often painful.

Harry's eyes lit up. "Could I help you sometime, Professor?"

"Gather ingredients?" Snape was a bit taken aback by the enthusiasm in the child's eyes.

"It sounds really interesting, sir!" Harry didn't say that such an excursion would give him a chance to spend more time with Dark Man... er... the professor.

"I find the gathering of ingredients to be..." Snape paused a moment, but then continued since he felt an odd compulsion to impress the boy. "To be... one of my favourite things about potions brewing."

Harry smiled, mostly to himself. He knew what this small bit of knowledge about his teacher was; it was gold. He then looked up. "So, uhm, could I go sometime, sir?"

"After the first snow I'll be harvesting snowdrops. It takes a delicate hand to pluck the blossoms so as not to bruise them. Do you think you could do this, Mr. Potter?" Snape crossed his arms over his chest to regard the young boy who would not lower his eyes. Or, take a breath.

Finally, Harry puffed out, "Yes, sir! I could do that." He gave his professor his most hopeful look; a widening of his eyes and a very slight shadow of a smile upon his lips.

Snape nodded in acceptance. "Very well then, Mr. Potter. You may help me."

"Yes!" Harry slapped his palm over his mouth. "Oops. Thank you, sir," he amended a little more quietly.

Although Snape did not smile, he was pleased by Harry's obvious joy and found himself genuinely looked forward to the first snow.

"Now then, Harry," the child's expression sobered instantly at the use of his first name. "We didn't get a chance to go over your time with the Headmaster other than for me to learn that he attempted to Legilimens you."

"Professor Dumbledore shouldn't be allowed to do that," mumbled Harry sullenly.

"No, he should not." Snape shifted slightly. He felt uncomfortable having to warn a student, to warn Harry, about the older man. True, in the last few days he'd learned more about the Headmaster that gave him less of a reason to trust the older man, but he'd been so used to obeying the older wizard that it was difficult. It made him feel ill knowing that the Headmaster might actually be a threat to Harry. And, in Snape's eyes, Legilimensing a student without his or her knowledge, was a threat.

"Harry, would you tell me what you and the Headmaster talked about?" Snape asked, delaying his warning he had planned about Dumbledore.

"He told me a story about Nicholas Flamel. It sounded too fantastic, at first, but then... then he..."

"It's not real, sir, is it?" Harry asked the Headmaster.

Dumbledore smiled, "The Philosopher's Stone is quite real, my boy! I've brought it to Hogwarts to better protect it."

Harry stared at the aged man. "It's here? But, how? I mean, are you sure no one can get it?" Harry understood that the Stone could extend one's life, and that must be powerful magic. It seemed to him that something that powerful shouldn't be at a school but in some kind of really secure environment like a vault. It also bothered Harry that the Headmaster spoke so easily about the Stone. As if it wasn't important, yet the story seemed to make it important. He found Professor Dumbledore to be a confusing and worrisome man.

Harry shifted on his chair and glanced anxiously towards the closed office door. When he looked back, he was alarmed at how close the Headmaster's face was to his. He edged back when he saw that the harmless twinkle had now a hard, threatening edge to it.

"Oooh I'm a very clever wizard, Harry, and I had other clever folk help me as well. No one can get the Stone. Trust me."

Trust me? That exhortation made Harry wary. He never gave trust automatically to anyone. He'd been hurt enough to know that trust had to be earned.

Suddenly, something clicked in Harry's mind as he recalled the frightening meeting Draco and he had with the monster on the third floor corridor. Before he could stop himself, he blurted, "The Philosopher's Stone? That's what the three-headed monster is protecting!"

The Headmaster was unable to reply to Harry for at that moment the office door swung silently open and there stood the Dark Man. Harry's heart soared at the sight, but only for a moment. The Headmaster touched him, and Harry couldn't stop the strong flinch that made his head connect solidly with the back of the chair.

Snape reached over and wiped the single tear that slid down Harry's cheek at the bothersome memory. "I am so sorry I did not get there sooner, Harry. This will not happen again, I promise you." Snape then leaned a bit closer, his dark gaze capturing Harry's green-eyed, still slightly glistening eyes. "Listen carefully to me, Harry. Do not ever go anywhere alone with the Headmaster. Keep Draco or Hermione close, so if you cannot avoid him, one of them can come and get me."

Harry reached into his bag for a handkerchief and blew his nose. Snape smiled inwardly at the child's forethought.

"Professor?" Harry worried the handkerchief so strongly between his hands, he had almost tied it in a knot. "Isn't the Headmaster is supposed to be a good man?"

"Albus Dumbledore is a man, Harry. And, as any man, he does his best, but sometimes his best is not enough." Harry frowned, not quite understanding. Snape sighed. This was not an easy question to answer with a yes or a no. He believed that Dumbledore had the good of the Wizarding world at heart, but was he good to individuals? Snape wasn't certain he could even answer that for himself. Not while he still felt betrayed by the man. Not while he

intended to send Harry back to abusive relatives. Not while that venerable, secretive, manipulative, powerful wizard claimed to have no trust for Harry Potter!

Before Snape could blurt out something that reflected the sudden anger of his thoughts, Harry answered his own question. "He scares me."

Snape leaned his elbow upon the surface of the short desk. Inwardly, he whispered, he scares me, too.

Tea. It was the universal balm. Snape escorted Harry through his office and into his private quarters where they both quietly fell into the routine of fixing tea in the kitchen. In his cupboard were a few chocolate chip biscuits, an indulgence of Snape's when he sometimes felt overwhelmed by the essays he had to grade. Harry arranged them on a small platter that he then placed on the tea tray. As Snape steeped the tea, he allowed himself a small smile. The ease with which the two of them worked in the kitchen felt good to him. It reminded him of easier times.

"Your grandmother taught me how to cook," Snape said. Wonder at himself for imparting this personal tidbit was masked as he picked up the tea tray and carried it to the living room. Harry, momentarily stunned, had to walk fast to catch up before seating himself on the sofa.

"You knew my grandmother, sir?" asked Harry in disbelief.

"Well, I knew your mother, so by default, I knew your grandparents as well." Snape poured the tea and handed Harry a cup. He then seated himself with his.

"How did you meet my mum?" asked Harry, blowing his breath gently across the surface of the hot tea. It was chamomile they were both imbibing.

"We were both eight years old when we met," Snape began, leaning his head against the back of his chair. He ignored the tightening, wincing pain in his heart as he drifted back to those days. "A park separated our two neighborhoods, but it was overgrown and not really used anymore. The swings were good, though. I liked the swings. If I got high enough I always thought I might touch the sky."

Harry smiled as he took a sip of his tea. He understood the feeling. Snape saw the smile. "You know the feeling?"

Harry nodded. "There was a small park down our street. A couple of times, Mrs. Figg, when she was sitting me, would take me there. She liked the walk. But, I always liked the swings. It felt like... like flying." Harry smiled, but blushed as he recalled how he and Draco had to stand with their noses against the castle when Snape had taken over flying class.

Snape agreed, "It does, doesn't it?" He marveled at how at ease he was feeling this moment. Never did he care to think of the past, but somehow he felt a pleasant relief at sharing these personal memories with Harry. It was... disconcerting for he wasn't the type to dwell upon the past and his memories were so very private. However, he felt deep down inside that in sharing these memories, but only with Harry, the boy would understand how precious they were.

"I would go whenever I could get away from chores and play in the park," Snape was interrupted by an amused snort that wasn't covered up well. He gave Harry a mock scowl softened by a slight smile at the corner of one side of his mouth. "Yes, Mr. Potter. Strange though it may sound, I was a child once, and I did play."

Harry was immediately sorry and apologised. "I'm sorry, sir. It's just kind of hard to imagine that any adult I know was ever a kid." He frowned as an image of Uncle Vernon as a miniature version of Dudley, but with a mustache, popped into his mind. He shook it away.

Snape sighed sadly. "Many of us adults forget that we were once children." He sipped at his tea and resumed his story. He told Harry of the pretty, red-haired girl with the green eyes who floated when she jumped from the swings. In that very second, Snape had known the girl was a witch.

"You're a witch!" Eight year old Severus enthused as he ran from his hiding place and over to the swings. The pretty girl, her cheeks flushed pink and her green eyes shining, grinned at him.

"Get away, you raggedy freak!" This insult came from a thin, plain looking girl with dishwater blonde hair. She stepped in front of the

other girl and menaced Severus by looking down upon him. He backed away a step.

The other girl looked around the thin one at him. Her smile was inviting, playful. "Oh, Tuney! Stop it. He means no harm."

"Just look at him, Lily!" snapped the one called Tuney. "He looks like one of those homeless beggars in town." She glared at Severus. "Are you a beggar? Have you come to us for money? For food? Well, you'll get nothing, you worthless piece of..."

Lily pushed the older girl aside who yelped indignantly. "Don't be mean, Tuney!"

"Fine! I'm telling mother!" Tuney then ran from the old playground while Lily walked over towards Severus.

"I'm Lily Evans. Just ignore Petunia. She's a prat." Lily stuck her hand out.

"Severus Snape," he said with a smile as he took her hand. "You're a witch."

"So how come my grandmother taught you to cook, sir?" asked Harry as he smiled at the thought of his mother calling Aunt Petunia a prat.

"My mother was talented at many things, but, unfortunately, she could not cook," sighed the Potions Master. He glanced in woe at his thin frame. "Your grandmother, though, was a true witch in the kitchen." He smiled in fond memory of savory meat pies, an unbelievable, three-layered cake for one of his birthdays, and chocolate chip biscuits. Oh, those had always been his favourite. He leaned forward and picked up one of the biscuits and bit into it. "Not quite as good as your grandmother's but I believe rather close. What do you think, Harry?"

Snape watched as Harry experimentally bit into the biscuit. He thought it was wonderful and said so. "Did you make these, sir?"

Snape turned to his bookcase and summoned a book. It was cloth covered with hearts that had been cut out and pasted all over the front. It was worn and stained, but Harry could tell that the simple

book with ragged looking pages, was a treasure beyond compare. Snape ran his slim fingers down the front of it, smiling softly.

Harry, so used to his teacher's more dour and stern expressions, rather liked the man's smile. He hoped to see more of them. To his surprise, Snape handed the book over and Harry took it, carefully.

On the front were embroidered letters that read, Severus Snape's Cookbook. Embedded just below that, part of the book's cover, was an old black and white photograph of a much younger and smaller Snape, grinning, as he held a platter heaped with what only could be chocolate chip biscuits.

"Your grandmother made it for me. She'd made similar ones for Lily and your aunt," Snape said by way of explanation.

"I never saw anything like this in Aunt Petunia's kitchen," sighed Harry. He couldn't imagine his fastidious aunt even allowing something so plain in her perfect house. "What happened to the one my mum had?" Harry looked up at Snape.

Snape shook his head. "I don't know." Unfortunately, he had too good of a suspicion as to what had happened to it. Lily's cookbook, like everything else she owned, was gone. Turned into galleons for a war effort. Her jewelry, keepsakes, her collection of silly romance novels all disposed of by the Headmaster. Had Dumbledore kept any of it? Not, according to the goblins at Gringott's. All that Dumbledore had saved was a ridiculous invisible cloak Potter had once had. Snape's eyes narrowed darkly. Couldn't that bastard have at least saved the photographs of Lily?

Harry opened the book to the first page and saw what he assumed to be his grandmother's handwriting. He smiled as she had written, "To my dearest Severus on his ninth birthday. With these recipes may your tummy always be happy. Love, Mama Lea."

"Hagrid gave me a photograph album for my birthday when he came to take me to Diagon Alley for the first time," Harry shared. "There was a photo in there of my grandparents at my parents wedding. Grandpa was real tall and thin and my grandma was short and sorta soft like. I thought she always looked like she might have hugged a lot." Harry sighed, suddenly unhappy as he uttered, "Uncle Vernon burned that, too."

Photographs? Where had Hagrid gotten those? Snape wondered. "Lea Evans was a very affectionate woman," Snape agreed with Harry's remembrance of the photograph. "Your grandmother was a very kind and warm person. Just as Lily was." Of course that beast Dursley burned the photo album! He'd destroy anything that had the potential of making Harry happy. Snape was looking forward to a visit with those Muggles.

For a moment, both were silent, their thoughts both upon Lily.

Harry had a tiny spark of jealousy at learning that the Professor had known his mother. He sighed away the jealousy, though. It meant little when he knew he had his teacher, his Dark Man. Professor Snape could probably tell him many stories about his mother.

Snape's heart was in pain as his memories flowed around his mind, almost drowning him. He knew it was good of him to tell the boy about his mother. Everyone else had known her when she was at Hogwarts, or when she was wife to Potter. No one, but he, had known her as a child. A sweet and pretty girl who laughed at silly things, screeched at bugs, couldn't get enough of key lime pie, and loved to fly on the swing.

Where Petunia was dull, abrasive, and a bully, Lily was bright, brave and a champion.

And Snape was learning that Harry reminded him more of Lily than of the arrogant, braggadocio that was the young James Potter of Gryffindor.

The rest of the tea was pleasant and spent over Harry telling Snape how he was doing in his other classes and in Slytherin. By the end of tea, Harry was laughing over some prank that the first years had pulled on the obnoxious Marcus Flint and Snape was amused (though he'd be certain, as Head of Slytherin House, to never admit it).

Wednesday, Oct. 2, 1991

Malfoy Manor



Dobby popped into his master's study holding a large scroll in his long fingers. Lucius, going over the estate books took the mail from the house elf and waved him off without looking at him. He dropped the mail on a corner of his desk and went back to the books.

An hour later, Lucius was finally finished with the books, one of the most dull jobs a patriarch must pay attention to, he was glad to have it done. Once he got through the mail, then he and Narcissa would have a free afternoon in which he planned to cook for his wife.

He smirked, as he picked up the mail. He didn't cook often. It gave the kitchen elves apoplexy for a week when he did so. However, he enjoyed doing such small things for his beloved wife. Especially when she was so appreciative of his efforts later.

Sealed around the scroll was a neatly written letter in black ink. It was from his sponsored daughter, Hermione Granger. He began to read the letter.

Dear Mr. and Mrs. Malfoy,

Thank you so much for the lovely weekend and for sponsoring me. I am looking forward to my re-Sorting and am in the hopes it can be accomplished soon. Draco and Harry have been telling me how great Slytherin is and I suspect that is where they'd like me to be. I confess, I'd like to be there, too. What do you think?

I am also looking forward to your Winter Ball. Draco hasn't said much about it, but I have heard a lot of the Slytherin girls talking about it. I've never been to a ball. Mrs. Malfoy, if you have some time, could you help me in picking out something appropriate for the ball. I don't want to embarrass you and Mr. Malfoy.

Mr. Malfoy I have enclosed all the Quidditch Little League information for you. I think Harry and Draco are hoping this can be done. Maybe before the first official Hogwarts game?

I made a copy of all the information, so if you have any questions I can help with, do let me know.

Sincerely,

Hermione Granger

Lucius put down Hermione's letter and turned his attention to the thicker scroll. Leaning back in his leather desk chair he began to read.

Over breakfast Harry's mind was once again on the Philosopher's Stone. He knew he should probably just forget about it and the three headed dog, but it worried him. He could care less about the Stone. His concern was more for someone getting to it. How could he be certain that the monster was enough. He stabbed his fork at his scrambled eggs.

Stupid thought, his thoughts laughed at him. I think a monster like that huge, ugly dog would be enough to scare anyone away, wouldn't it?

"Are you going to tell us what's been bothering you, yet?" asked Draco peevishly. Ever since Saturday his friend had been moody, speaking very little, and his patience with Harry was wearing thin. It was very annoying that Harry was stabbing his food with his silverware and not eating anything.

Hermione snatched the vicious fork from Harry and he glared at her. For extra measure, he gave Draco a glare, too. "What?" he snapped at them both.

Hermione scowled. "What's going on, Harry? You're worrying us to death."

In answer, Harry just got up from the table and walked out of the Great Hall. Draco and Hermione looked at each other before abandoning their meals, and running after their friend.

Up at the staff table, Snape caught the Silver Trio, as Minerva had recently dubbed them, leaving the Great Hall. Dabbing his lips with his napkin, Snape smoothly left the staff table, going through the narrow door that was just behind his chair. Using a few of the castle's secret passageways he quickly caught up with the three friends and followed them silently.

Draco and Hermione jogged to catch up with Harry who was heading down the Armory Corridor, the corridor lined with display stands of medieval armor. At the end of the corridor was a large

tapestry that covered an open arch that led to a balcony that overlooked the Quidditch pitch. Hermione, the clever witch, cast a Warming Spell that kept them from the chill breeze as they all three sat down on the balcony.

Harry, doing his best to delay the inevitable, asked, "Hermione, how come you know these spells? I just got my Wingardium Leviosa to work."

"You should read more, Harry," she replied seriously. "They're all in our textbooks."

Draco's mouth dropped. "No way! You did not learn a Boil Jinx from a textbook!"

"The Warming Spell I did. That's next year, but it's an easy spell and I've seen a lot of the Gryffindors casting it. The Boil Jinx I saw some seventh year Ravenclaw girls practicing it," she shrugged, suddenly conscious of perhaps she was showing off. "I just, well, remembered it."

Harry chuckled, "You're wicked, Hermione."

Draco shoved his shoulder affectionately against hers, "I'm glad we're not enemies, Hermione. I'd wind up with my ears on my arse."

Hermione smiled and giggled. Teasingly she shot back, "I know a spell for that!"

"No! No!" both boys laughed and squashed her between them. Draco then leaned forward. "C'mon, Harry. Give. What's been going on? You've been, like spooked, ever since the Headmaster kept you in his office."

"Did he hurt you, Harry?" Hermione asked softly.

Harry knew just what she was implying and he paled, "God, no, Hermione! Nothing like that. He just, well, he told me a story." Draco frowned, his mouth pursed tightly as his arms crossed over his chest. "It was weird. Not the story, but him. Like he was being all sort of nice and grandfatherly, but he scared me. And, don't ever take lemon drops from him."

Draco shook his head. "Father said Dumbledore laces them with Veritaserum."

"What's that?" asked Harry.

Hermione was the one to reply, "It's like truth serum, Harry."

"Is that legal?" Harry was once more appalled.

"According to Hogwarts: A History a Headmaster is allowed to use a diluted form of Veritaserum on the students, but only within the confines of his office. The Veritaserum must be taken voluntarily." Hermione sounded like she was quoting from the book.

Harry glowered. "Offering it in a lemon drop is sneaky."

"Kind of Slytherin," mused Draco with a touch of admiration.

"How does your father know about this, Draco," asked Hermione.

The boy just shrugged. "So, what was the story?"

So Harry related to them the story of the Philosopher's Stone. "You remember that three headed dog?"

Hermione frowned. "What three headed dog?"

Draco explained, "Well, you remember that day when Professor Snape made you cry?" she nodded. "Well, we went to go find you, but sort of got lost and we wound up on the third floor corridor."

"The one the Headmaster warned us against at the Feast?" she asked.

Draco nodded, "Yeah. Anyway, there's a real old door up there and we thought it might lead back to where we came, but it's some kind of room and there's a huge dog behind it with three heads."

"Really huge," whispered Harry. Just thinking of that dog made his heart jump.

"Is it a Cerberus?" Hermione asked.

"A what?" both boys exclaimed.

Hermione dug around in her bag and brought out a book covered in red leather. The title was 'Fantastic Beast and Where to Find Them' by Newt Scamander. There were several strips of parchment bookmarking places between the pages. Hermione opened the book to one. She pointed to an animated drawing of a three-headed dog that took up one page.

"Ew, it's drooling," remarked Harry.

"Is this what you saw?" Hermione asked as the Cereberus crouched down and began to growl silently.

Draco nodded worriedly and then shut the book. "That's the monster."

Hermione frowned as her fingers tapped the closed book. "Why would Professor Dumbledore bring something as valuable as the Philosopher's Stone into Hogwarts?"

"He's obviously hiding it," said Draco.

"But why?" asked Harry. "And from who?" Harry shivered. "I think it's dangerous."

Hermione agreed, "If someone who shouldn't get hold of it and they could brew the potion, they'd be immortal."

"A wizard that's powerful enough isn't going to be afraid of a big old three headed dog," scoffed Draco.

"Harry, why did Professor Dumbledore tell you about the Philosopher's Stone?" asked Hermione.

He shrugged. "I don't know. But," Harry frowned remembering the Headmaster as he looked at him. Those twinkling eyes with that hard edge. "I don't... do you think he thinks I want it?" he looked confused and stricken.

Hermione's expression was shocked. "Don't you dare go after it, Harry!"

He glared. "I don't want it! Why do you think I'd go after it?"

"You just had that look," she said vaguely. Draco leaned forward and peered at Harry's face. Harry looked away from them both until Hermione touched his shoulder. "Be honest, Harry. Haven't you thought about getting it?"

Before Harry could answer, Snape stepped forth from the shadows and onto the balcony. Hermione let out a startled yelp as they all three looked up at the imposing Potions Master who glared darkly down at them.

"I'd better not catch any of you gallivanting off after that Stone," he warned.

Harry scowled at his teacher, "If you were eavesdropping, sir, then you know I don't want it!"

Snape glared at Harry. "I am not saying that you would steal it, Mr. Potter. I am implying that you might play the hero and go after the stone before someone who should not does." Snape watched the boy's reaction closely.

Harry's shoulders drooped as he looked down at his hands. "Professor Dumbledore says my parents were heroes." Harry's fingers curled into the cloth of his robe before looking upward and into his teacher's eyes. His voice was hard and filled with betrayal as he declared, "They died."

Snape motioned the Trio to stand up. As they did so he asked Harry, "Why do you think the Headmaster believes your parents were heroes?"

Harry replied uncertainly, "They fought against You-Know-Who?"

Snape slowly shook his head. "No, Mr. Potter. Your parents fought and died to protect you. Because they loved you. That is what makes them heroes."

"Oh." He said, feeling a bit stupid. He also wasn't comfortable being chastised in front of his friends for something he didn't even want to do.

"Why are you still worrying about that Stone, Mr. Potter?" Snape asked.

"Well, it's dangerous, isn't it? What if someone gets it and hurts my friends?" asked Harry hotly.

"Laudable though it is to have your friends best interests at heart, Mr. Potter, it is not up to you to worry about something that we adults are taking care of." Snape's tone held a warning.

Harry, angry at being misunderstood, shouted, "What if you get hurt?"

Snape stiffened. He hadn't expected that, but he should have known to. After all, the boy clearly saw him as his protector... daddy, his mind whispered a reminder. Drawing his robes around him, he stood tall and replied a bit cooler than he meant to, "You need not worry, Mr. Potter. I will be well." He stepped out of the way of the balcony entrance and addressed the Trio. "Your first class of the day will be starting soon. Go."

Hermione stepped ahead of both boys to be followed by Draco. Harry, still stinging from the rebuke and warning brushed past his teacher. A gentle hand to his shoulder stopped him.

"Thank you, Harry," Snape said only soft enough for the boy to hear.

Harry's hand went to the one on his shoulder. His fingertips brushed the back of his teacher's hand. Without looking back, he trotted to go and catch up with his friends.

"...buttons into knuts, knuts into buttons," griped Draco as he, Harry, and Hermione left the Entrance Hall towards the Great Hall. They had just completed Transfiguration class. "Can't we do anything more interesting?"

"Transfiguration is difficult, Draco," said Hermione. "It's like breathing..." she was interrupted by a dark scowl from the boy.

"I don't want to breathe buttons and knuts!" he declared sarcastically.

Hermione huffed, "I didn't mean it like that! You have to know what you're changing something into."

"I think I know... Ow! Harry!" Harry had just lightly punched Draco's shoulder.

"What's your dad doing here?" asked Harry as he indicated the figure of Lucius Malfoy sitting at the staff table.

Draco stared up at his father in puzzlement. The elder Malfoy gave his son a polite nod and an acknowledging smile. Still confused, Draco just gave his father a quick smile before sitting down for lunch at the Slytherin table.

More students filed into the Great Hall and amidst a low buzz of speculation from all the students, Dumbledore quieted the noise by clanging his spoon against the side of his goblet. He rose from his chair and smiled down at the students.

"Before we indulge in our afternoon feast, I have an announcement to make. Hogwarts has just instituted the very first Quidditch Little League." Conversation broke out amongst the students and Dumbledore had to clang his spoon a bit harder against his goblet. He grinned. "Our little league is just for the first years. Since you will not be playing for the House cup..." that elicited a few boos and the Headmaster gave them all a soft, admonishing glare. "You will be playing for a very nice prize." Dozens of faces lit up with interest.

"What's the prize?" shouted someone from the Gryffindor table.

Dumbledore continued, "The winning team will get a day at Hogsmeade." The Great Hall erupted in cheers since the first years weren't allowed to go to Hogsmeade until their second year. Dumbledore's smile widened and his eyes twinkled brightly. "Allow me to introduce your new Quidditch Little League coach and referee, Lucius Malfoy!"

Draco's jaw dropped in utter shock as he stared up at his father rising from his seat to the sound of cheers; loudest from the first years.

When the commotion had died down enough that Lucius did not have to shout, he looked out over the students, his eyes alighting briefly upon his son. He smirked, pleased at having given the boy such a shock.



"Tryouts will be this afternoon. That means, for today only, that afternoon classes are canceled." There were more cheers, except for one lone Gryffindor at the Slytherin table. Hermione let out a huff of indignation. "There will be four House teams and so I will be looking for a captain from the fourth to seventh years for each team. I look forward to seeing all of you after lunch."

Lucius seated himself to the noise of students eating and chattering about the new little league team. Lucius caught Hermione's eye and winked at the girl. Draco elbowed her good naturedly.

"Harry, we get to play Quidditch now!" enthused Draco. "I want to be Seeker! What do you want to be?"

Harry's eyes were bright with anticipation, but the truth was, he'd never played the game. He'd heard of it and he'd seen one of the practices, but he had no idea if he'd be any good. It didn't matter, he was caught up with the other first year Slytherins as they all discussed the game.

Hermione ate her salad and stuck her nose in a textbook. Inwardly, she smiled.

A/N: Well, Lucius Malfoy as a Little League coach. I don't think you can get anymore AU than that. ;-)

Trouble is on its way, despite Snape's best efforts in deflecting it, so stay tuned to this wizard channel for the next chapter.

A reader was worried that I would not finish this story and I just wanted to assure everyone that I will not post anything I cannot finish. I am intending to allow this story to carry me through the summer. I have Reverse Seasonal Disorder, which means I have less energy and get more depressed in the warmer months than I do in the colder months. I enjoy the feedback from you, my lovely readers, as each and every one energizes me for the next chapter.

To the readers of Second Chance: The Death Eater & The Rat. I am working on the epilogue and am doing my best to get any and all requests and questions in there.

Wednesday, Oct. 2, 1991

The entire student body of Hogwarts and its staff had assembled out on the Quidditch pitch and the in the stands to watch the tryouts for Hogwarts first Quidditch Little League. Lucius Malfoy, one time reluctant Death Eater and now the new coach, was tall. He stood out further in a very Malfoy modified Slytherin Quidditch uniform of dove grey wool trousers, white silk shirt, a green quilted over-vest and matching, heavy draping robes. Snape had to snort at the fashion plate the vain wizard made amongst the group of first years.

Lucius was assisted by the Slytherin prefects Tara Anglaise and Gordon Billock. They corralled the excited boys and girls that wanted to try out, which was nearly all of them, and took down their names.

"Oh my great Aunt Matilda's crossed eyes!" cursed Minerva who was seated next to Snape. "He bought new brooms?" A group of third year Slytherins was parading in a procession of brand new brooms for the little league teams.

Snape shrugged. "I would expect no less of Lucius. He has always been one to make certain all bases were covered." He squinted down at his third years. "As I thought. Those brooms appear to be the latest junior Quidditch brooms."

"Indeed," agreed Minerva as she crossed her arms over her chest. "At least no one team will have an unfair advantage."

"D-d-do my eyes d-d-deceive me?" stuttered Quirrell behind them. "Are the g-g-goals sh-sh-shorter?"

Snape's nose wrinkled at the horrid smell of garlic that wafted towards him as the DADA instructor leaned over he and Minerva. "I suspect that as it is a little league," Snape educated with boredom laced through his voice, "everything will be scaled down appropriately."

Down on the pitch Prefect Billock shouted for all the kids to be quiet. He turned to Lucius. "Okay, sir. Looks like we have Betty Greenhorn as captain for Hufflepuff," a sixth year, pert looking blonde haired girl with a slim build raised her hand as her name was mentioned. She received a smattering of cheers from the Hufflepuff firsties. "Syrian

Toss for Ravenclaw," Syrian was a striking looking fourth year with piercing blue eyes. He received a bit of applause as he raised his hand. "Uhm... Fred and George Weasley of Gryffindor?" Both Billock and Lucius glanced at the two grinning twins. The first year Gryffindors were clustered around the twins as though challenging Lucius to deny one or the other.

Lucius gave the twins an appraising glare, then nodded, waving his hand dismissively. "Quite all right, Prefect Billock. Who do we have for Slytherin as captain?"

Billock looked down at his clipboard. "Corey Vaisey for Slytherin."

Lucius glanced at the Slytherin boy, a fourth year. Corey was a sullen looking boy with limp, brown hair and hooded brown eyes. The boy's eyes narrowed at Lucius. The older wizard did not flinch under the boy's gaze and returned it until Corey looked away.

Lucius began calling out names and the youngsters stepped forward if they weren't already near him. When he was finished, he instructed, "Grab a broom and just fly. Do your best."

Draco grabbed Harry's hand and they ran over to the stack of new brooms. They each grabbed one and were the first two in the air.

Prefect Anglaise was frowning at her clipboard and then glancing up at the fliers. After a huff of frustration, she called to Lucius. "Mr. Malfoy?" He looked away from the tryout in the air and towards the prefect. "We have a problem, sir. For four teams we need a total of twenty eight kids. We only have twenty four trying out and..." she looked skyward, "...and judging by some of those flying, we might have even less."

Lucius frowned. That was one problem he had not anticipated. Perhaps he should have given his idea more than just the few hours he'd had from the moment Miss Granger's letter had reached him late that morning.

"Do they have to be House teams, Mr. Malfoy?" asked George Weasley.

"I suppose not," he replied slowly. "What have you in mind, Mr. Weasley?"

Fred answered, "Create teams from those you have left, sir."

George smiled, "And so there isn't argument over which House they're representing, let them pick names for their teams."

Lucius nodded in appreciation of the idea. "Excellent, Masters Weasley. I think that's just what we'll do."

Up in the stands Minerva elbowed Snape and he glowered at her. He was trying not to watch Harry fly at the same time as he was keeping an eye on the boy.

"He flies well, Severus," commented the Deputy Headmistress.

"He's a menace," ground out Snape as Harry executed a perfect loop de loop.

"That's talent you'll want to encourage," Minerva continued. Snape wished that the older woman would shut her mouth. He was finding these trials to be too uncomfortable to watch. "I think Harry might be better than James. What do you think, Severus?"

"Potter was a bloody arrogant daredevil that was too busy trying to impress all the girls in the stands rather than trying to play the game!" he snapped. Grimly he recalled one time during a Ravenclaw/Gryffindor match that the blowhard was attempting to get Lily's attention. The idiot had been struck by a bludger. It had earned him three days in the Infirmary and not once had Lily even given a thought to the Marauder.

Minerva narrowed her eyes at Snape's thin smile. "I would bet my last galleon that you're remembering when James was hit by the bludger in his third year."

Snape scowled and adjusted the collar of his outer cloak.

Minerva chuckled smugly. "I'm right, aren't I?"

Snape ignored his colleague and kept his attention on Harry as he flew in a beautiful spiral, beside Draco, down to the ground. Flushed with excitement, the two boys ran over to Lucius for word on who would get to continue onto the next trials.

Once everyone was out of the air, Lucius quickly read off several names until they were left with twenty one to play on the teams. Lucius explained the change he was going to make. There were some groans, at first, but the idea that the final teams would get to make up their own name was appealing.

"I just don't want to play on a team with slimy snakes," Ronald Weasley glowered, not thinking that he was not just insulting the Slytherin first years, but their coach as well.

"I don't want to play with a moronic Gryffindor!" growled Teddy Nott.

Similar sentiments broke out between nearly all of the Gryffindors and Slytherins. Harry just quietly watched as it all played out.

"I think you've no choice in the matter," Lucius asserted firmly. "Teams will be assigned according to who does best at what position, so if Gryffindors or Slytherins offend you that much, then by all means, join your House in the stands. I'm sure we'll have enough leftover to play without you." His grey eyes raked over all the dissenters who shuffled or scuffed their feet and stared hard at the ground. Not one left.

"Very good," smiled Lucius, but his smile was hard and held the warning that he wouldn't put up with bad sportsmanship. "Consider this an exercise in House unity. You will all be setting a fine example for the upper years."

Draco grinned at that and Harry smiled back, glad to see that the elder Malfoy had defused the situation smoothly.

Lucius then had Prefect Anglaise bring out the Quidditch equipment. Ronald Weasley scowled down at the box that contained everything.

"Why's it all so small?" he demanded.

"This is little league, Mr. Weasley," sneered Lucius. "You can hardly be expected to play with the more... lethal bludgers and quaffle that are used in the Hogwarts competitions."

Ronald refused to be cowed by the Death Eater and he sneered back. "Does that mean we can't fly high, either?"

"You are eleven years old, Mr. Weasley. Little league will have some restrictions but it will not take away the entertainment value of the game." Lucius did not care for this youngest Weasley.

Draco piped up, "We get to fly, Weasel! And our team is gonna win so we can go to Hogsmeade!"

"No chance, Malfoy," declared Ronald. "My brothers and I play real Quidditch so we'll clean your clocks!"

"Your flying is pants!" yelled Draco, now face to face with the Weasley boy.

"Draco!" snapped his father. Lucius' son paled and turned to face his father with a very contrite expression. "Am I to understand that neither you nor Mr. Weasley wish to be a part of little league?" Lucius gave the two malcontents a deep frown.

It took every ounce of courage the smallest Malfoy had to keep his hands at his sides and not behind his back to protect his bum. His father had told him he was too old for spanking, so even though he knew he was in trouble, whatever punishment his father chose to mete out would not be that. Draco knew he had to say something, but his throat had gone inconveniently dry. It was Harry who saved the day.

"Mr. Malfoy, I don't want to play if Draco and Ron don't get to play." Ronald's jaw dropped as he looked at the Slytherin. Draco was also rather stunned to find Weaselby's name with his.

Lucius regarded the young boy now standing, bravely, in front of him. "Why do you think I should allow them to play, Mr. Potter."

Harry half shrugged before replying. "Well, if we just play, and one team wins, then nobodies arguments matter, right?"

He smiled warmly at Harry. "Quite so, Mr. Potter. Let them battle it out honorably." Lucius then glared down at Draco and Ronald. "Is that possible for the two of you? Can you concentrate on the game instead of attempting to outdo each other?"

"I will if he will!" Ronald said hotly and with a challenging smile at Draco.

"Okay," agreed Draco. Under his breath he added, "But we'll beat you, Gryffindork."

No one else heard Draco, but his father did and promptly smacked the back of his son's head lightly in warning.

"Enough of this," Lucius spoke loudly, but didn't shout. "Let's get ready for the next trial."

Up in the stands Snape had followed most of the argument between the two boys with a combination of reading the body language, facial expressions, and lips. He smirked to himself. He would have tossed both boys into the lake and allowed neither to play. "The patience of a saint," chuckled Snape, referring to Lucius and his unlikely, but perfectly Slytherin action of volunteering to coach these little league teams.

Was his old friend perhaps changing as he got older, wondered Snape. He never had doubt that the eldest Malfoy loved his family. He had personally seen the man suffer torture and risk death for Narcissa and Draco many times. What Snape had never imagined, though, was that Lucius would take such an interest in his son's well-being that he would allow himself to be volunteered (by the clever Miss Granger) into overseeing an activity that was not an intellectual pursuit.

By the time the tryouts ended, Snape felt ready for a nap, Minerva had fallen asleep and leaned against Snape's shoulder, snoring softly, and the teams had been created.

Snape yawned, then woke his colleague, who pretended that she hadn't been napping for the last hour, and he then made his way down the stands behind the crowd of the students and staff. Had he not been exhausted, he might have noticed the steady stare of hatred that Professor Quirrell aimed at a jubilant, raven haired little boy with glasses who was jumping up and down with his Quidditch Little League team.

Professor Quirrell pushed past Snape, stammered an apology, and was quickly swallowed up by the bustling crowd. Snape managed an

indignant glare, but quickly gave it up as he was met on the field by a very bouncy Harry Potter.

"Did you see me, sir?" Harry crowed. "I caught the snitch! I get to be the Seeker!"

"I did see, Mr. Potter. I also saw that reckless maneuver of yours where you nearly plowed into the ground in order to catch the snitch." Snape's look of disapproval did not dampen the boy's enthusiasm. Harry grabbed Snape's hand and drew him happily over to the circle of his teammates who then regaled poor Snape with a blow by blow recitation of everything he'd seen from the stands.

Just behind him, he heard Minerva's amused voice quip, "Patience of a saint, Severus."

Draco was walking, unbouncing, next to his father. Lucius had long ago, from the time his son first learned to walk, shortened his normal pace so that Draco didn't have to trot behind him. He was waiting, a bit anxiously he admitted to himself, for Draco to say something to him. He knew that Draco always loved to play Catch the Snitch at home, so he was certain that his son would be disappointed in being a Chaser. It had really been a close contest between Draco and his friend Harry, but he'd been sure, as he was assigning positions, that Draco would want to be on the same team as Harry. You couldn't really have two Seekers, and Lucius was honest, Harry, by a smidge, mind you, was just a bit smoother than Draco was.

But, what if he'd guessed wrongly? There were enough players, precisely, for two teams when the flying trial had finished. It was a bit of a relief, because Lucius had been second guessing his intelligence in volunteering to coach the Hogwarts Quidditch Little League. Four teams would have been madness. At least he'd made the executive decision to keep his four... no five (he was beginning to think of the Weasley twins as one) captains which would take over most of the teaching duties.

Maybe he should have put Harry and Draco on opposite teams and then they both could have been Seekers. However, the moment when Lucius had been thinking of doing that, he imagined all the arguments and fights that might break out, mostly begun by Draco,



that would result if Harry won a game by catching the snitch. No, he thought it wiser for the two friends to be teammates.

Lucius glanced down at his son, trying to gauge his mood; to see if he was going to have to face one of Draco's infamous tantrums. The boy appeared calm, perfectly composed.

I've trained him too well to emulate me, Lucius' mind muttered to itself. Now I can't tell what he's thinking anymore.

Lucius then looked at Harry, who was practically skipping beside Snape, his hand clasped in the older man's hand. The other players were all behind their teachers laughing, jumping, squealing for joy and Lucius had no idea if his son was monumentally mad at him for choosing someone else as Seeker or...

Lucius nearly tripped as he was stopped by a small body that had suddenly wrapped itself around his lower half.

Draco, who had been taught at an early age not to show affection in public to his father, threw the rule out the window as he turned and hugged his father, and pressed his cheek against the tall man's abdomen.

Making his hug tighter, Draco gushed, "Thank you so much, father! This is going to make my first year great!"

Lucius touched his son's head as warmth suffused his body. His smile was surprised, but oh so very pleased. "You approve then, Dragon?" using his son's nickname to show the boy that this particular effusive display was quite all right by him. "Even though you're not the Seeker?"

"Well, yeah. I mean, I wish I could have been the Seeker, but I still get to fly fast because I'm a Chaser and maybe next year I'll get to be Slytherin's Seeker." Draco, who had yet to let go, gave his father's waist another squeeze. "What's really great, father, is you're the coach and you're going to be here for practices and games and I'll get to be with you. Isn't that going to be fun?"

Lucius looked down into his son's hopeful eyes and his hand cupped the boy's cheek affectionately. He felt an odd lump in his throat and

for a brief moment he wasn't sure that he'd be able to speak. Finally, he replied, "It will be fun, Dragon."

Draco pressed his cheek against his father again and shouted, "You're the best father ever!"

At the staff table during dinner, Lucius explained to Snape that the little league game of Quidditch had a time limit.

"Little league takes into consideration the age of the players who are unable to fly a match that might last four hours, or more. As such, there is a time limit to the game of two hours. At the end of two hours, if the snitch has not been caught a winning team is chosen by the number of goals scored." Lucius ate a bite of roast, chewed it, and swallowed it before continuing, "There are also quite a few safeguards built into the game and the equipment."

"Such as Cushioning Charms?" asked Professor Flitwick on the other side of Lucius.

"Modified Cushioning Charms on the bludgers, which are made of leather. Greatly reduces the chances of injury," he elaborated.

"Unless the child happens to fall from his broom and splatters his brains upon the pitch," muttered Snape in a tone of doom.

Lucius turned to his old friend and smiled at him. "As I recall, you never tried out for Quidditch during your time as a student, Severus."

Snape glowered at the teasing tone. "I preferred studying, thank you very much," he added caustically.

Lucius laughed and Flitwick chuckled. "Surely you will support Harry's endeavors in the game, won't you?"

"Why would I not, Lucius?" Snape asked, genuinely puzzled. "After today, it is all the boy can speak of. Like so many before him, he has fallen under the Siren Call of Quidditch."

"It is one thing to support your House team, Severus," replied Lucius. "For that is your duty as the Head of Slytherin to do so. It is quite another matter altogether to support one child whom you care for."

"I am concerned about all the children," insisted Snape.

"As well you should, Severus," agreed Lucius. "It is a pity that there aren't more who think as you do." The aristocrat dabbed delicately at his lips and stretched slightly. "Shall I meet you for a drink later, Severus?"

Snape nodded curtly. "I have a detention ending at nine."

Lucius rose, gave his friend a nod, and left the staff table. He stopped at the Slytherin table briefly to congratulate Harry and Draco on making the team. Without hesitation, Lucius touched Draco's head, and then his cheek with his fingertips. Draco smiled in unabashed love and admiration up at his father.

Snape, who had been watching the little scene between father and son, was slightly caught off guard as Harry chose that moment to give him a look that was a near mirror of the one Draco was giving his father. A lump of indeterminate origin formed in Snape's throat along with a strange sense of warmth that wasn't his Darjeeling tea. An odd sensation, but not entirely unpleasant. He nodded at the boy, and then tried to swallow past that lump. It was impossible!

Lucius and Snape were in Snape's living room having a touch of fire whiskey to end the day. Lucius was in a leather wingback chair with his long legs stretched out before him. Snape was in the opposite, matching chair, but appeared a bit stiffer, and didn't look half as comfortable as his friend did.

Snape frowned at the smile that had been on Lucius' face for the last five minutes. "I don't suppose you're ever going to lose that ridiculous smile, are you?"

"I did tell you that my son said I'm the best father, didn't I, Severus?" Lucius took a slow sip of his whiskey.

"Yes. Three times during dinner, twice on the way down here and once while I was pouring our drinks. That now counts as a seventh time," snapped Snape. He glowered into his drink, wondering at the sensation in his gut that felt remarkably like indigestion, but couldn't be.

Lucius smirked, "Why I do believe you sound a bit jealous, my friend."

Snape's head shot up as he aimed the glare, reserved for his whiskey, at the arrogant wizard. "And just what would I be jealous of?" Snape meant for that to sound rather venomous, and to anyone else it might have, but he had spoken this to Lucius, who, at times, had an uncanny ability to see a second meaning in the innocuous statement. It was one of the skills that made Lucius such a convincing speaker when speaking to politicians and business associates.

Lucius raised himself a bit straighter in the chair and his grey eyes pierced knowingly towards Snape, "Considering the way Mr. Potter held onto your hand this afternoon and walked, no skipped, beside you, I'd have thought you'd be rather content."

Snape's mind was a bit a-whirl with unfamiliar emotions at the moment and he wasn't having a great deal of luck in taming them with his Occlumency. He had been pleased when Harry had run up to him and despite the boy's nearly unintelligible commentary of what he'd seen from the stands, he had listened, only too content to walk with him, hand in hand, to the castle. Not once had he considered that it might be inappropriate, or that some people shouldn't see him holding hands with a student, much less the Boy-Who-Lived. Harry had chosen him to share his joy with and no other adult. And, it had been Harry who had looked upon him, in the Great Hall, with unabashed affection.

It had all unbalanced Snape's fussily ordered world.

"Dumbledore was none too pleased today." stated Lucius.

The statement, so blithely delivered, was like a bucket of ice water to Snape. He shoved all those conflicting emotions to the background and managed to sit a bit stiffer in his chair.

"With the little league?" Snape asked in deliberate avoidance of what he should have asked instead. He had honestly not once thought about the Headmaster and this worried him. He couldn't keep Harry safe if he wasn't vigilant about that old man.

Lucius drew his legs up so he was sitting a bit more formally in the chair. "No. Dumbledore was rather accepting of the little league. He seemed a bit more concerned that I insisted upon a strong role in the formation of the league and the running of it. I simply had to point out to him that he had duties as Hogwarts Headmaster to concern himself with and that since I was funding the whole thing for the children... well, he couldn't dispute any of that." He smiled smugly.

"I would never have seen you in the position of coach for a little league," Snape observed. "Or coach of anything. Why are you doing this?"

To Snape's satisfaction, it was Lucius' turn to be uncomfortable, although he did mean to get back to what had bothered Dumbledore about him today, later. Lucius did actually fidget, but then he quickly stilled.

"Narcissa has been concerned, of late, that I have been distancing myself from Draco. She does agree with me that he needs to be taught what his responsibilities are..." his voice faltered. After several seconds of staring into the flames, he spoke softly, "I am trying very hard not to be Abraxas, Severus. My child, for as long as he lives, deserves a father he can... love." Lucius smiled, knowing that he probably sounded soppy and foolish, but he trusted Snape to keep the momentary lapse to himself. "My son showed me today that I am able to be that father. We are going to have fun."

Snape smirked, a dark glimmer in his eyes. "Well, now that you have completely come undone, Lucius..."

The older man winced falsely, grinned wryly, and then called for a house elf.

A smaller than usual house elf popped into Snape's quarters and bowed as she wrung one pointed ear. "What may Kiki do for masters?"

"Tea," Lucius requested curtly. "Make it strong. I don't want a hangover tomorrow." The house elf bowed and popped out.

"I do have a Hangover Potion," Snape mentioned.

"Narcissa says that I rely too much on my potions," commented Lucius. "She says that if I must drink, then tea and something to eat before bed is better."

Snape made no comment. Inwardly, he smirked at the 'poor, trapped, married wizard'. The Potions Master had every intention to stay away from a well-meaning wife for as long as possible.

A few minutes later tea arrived and the conversation turned to Harry and the Dursleys.

"The investigation of the Dursleys has begun," Lucius informed. Snape recalled that the older wizard had mentioned a contact in the Muggle world.

"Has anything been discovered?" asked Snape.

"Nothing yet on Harry, but it is alarming what the Dursleys allow with their own son. He's morbidly obese," scowled Lucius.

"Isn't the cousin the same age as Harry?" Lucius nodded, and Snape frowned. "Then, he's eleven. How can an eleven year old child be morbidly obese?"

"If you can believe it, Severus, the child is nearly 14 stone over normal weight." Lucius shook his head as Snape's eyes widened in shock. "Mrs. Dursely appears rather thin, but her husband is nearly 30 stone. The investigator reported that a week's worth of shopping included four roasts, two hams, and enough sugar to kill a horse. On behalf of the cousin, the investigator is anxious to report the parents."

"Would that be enough to bring in the law?" Snape inquired.

"It's doubtful. The parents might receive a warning at most and the child would be put on a diet. As it is, though, if you are to adopt Harry without interference from Dumbledore and the Ministry," reminded Lucius, "then we cannot bring in the interference of the Muggle law enforcement agencies. Once we have Harry securely in your hands, then I'll have the investigator do what he wishes on behalf of the cousin."

"Then how am I to legally adopt Harry without the Ministry knowing?" Snape frowned, annoyed and frustrated.

"First the Dursleys must give up all rights to their nephew. I brought the paperwork that they need to sign, so if you wish, we can take care of that this weekend." Lucius smiled at some of the relief that was reflected in his friend's contemplative expression. "As to the adoption, I've been informed by a contact at the Ministry that there is no way for it to be done without the knowledge of the Ministry and rousing Dumbledore's suspicion."

Snape glowered, "Then there's nothing to be done! I'm going to have to let that old fool send Harry back to his relatives this summer."

Lucius gave the younger man a smug smile. Snape glared at Lucius knowing all too well that the older man had a trick up his sleeve and had waited until the last second to tell Snape in order to rile him up.

"Are you going to let me in on your monumental secret, Lucius?" Snape demanded caustically.

Lucius deliberately paused as he lightly tapped his fingers against his cup of tea. "Well, you must know that this is considered Dark magic. By today's definition, that is."

If possible, Snape's glare became darker and his impatience was simmering just beneath.

Lucius smiled, "It is a potion, which I think you'll approve of, and a spell, well, more of incantation. A ritual, I suppose..."

"What. Is. It?" Snape bit out through clenched teeth.

"Cruor mea cruor," Lucius said simply.

"Blood of my blood?" Snape had obviously never heard of it and waited a bit more for an explanation. "That sounds like a blood adoption."

"It is more than just a blood adoption, Severus. Although the blood adoption we are familiar with creates a link between parent and child, it is a magic that can easily be corrupted, such as turning someone into the slave of another."

Snape nodded knowingly. The blood adoption that had recently been labeled Dark Magic was rather too close to the Imperious Curse.

Lucius continued, "Cruor mea cruor would make Harry your own child as if you and Lily created him yourselves." Snape blushed at this and Lucius smirked. "It seeks to weave not just parent to child at a cellular level, but a magical one. Ministry law might not recognise it, at first, but Magical law would as it is unbreakable and incorruptible."

"Is it considered Dark because of the blood?" asked Snape.

Lucius nodded. "Just as all Blood magic has been declared Dark, so this is." The scoffing tone in his voice reflected how ridiculous he thought this arbitrary ruling was.

"It sounds as though I could wind up in Azkaban, and Harry would wind up back at the Dursleys," Snape commented skeptically.

"Cruor mea cruor would never need be mentioned, Severus. After taking the potion and performing the ritual, if the Ministry required a Familial test you and Harry would clearly and irrevocably register as father and son." For a moment Lucius' smile remained, and then it faded. "The drawback is that as soon as Harry were declared your biological son, he would lose his inheritance to the Potter fortune."

Snape sneered, "There is no 'Potter fortune' to inherit!" Now it was Lucius' turn to frown in puzzlement and so Snape explained how during the visit to Gringotts he had learned that Dumbledore had liquidated the entire Potter estate, including Lily's possessions, for the war effort."

"That's preposterous!" thundered Lucius. "Thomas Potter was worth five million galleons when his son married Lily! Are all the properties gone as well?"

Snape stood and went to his desk that he usually did grading at. He pushed aside some paperwork and then picked up a piece of parchment. He handed it to his friend who took it. "I asked the goblins for an accounting after we left. This is what they sent."



As Lucius perused the document, his silent outrage grew. Seven properties had been transferred into Dumbledore's name and then sold. The portion of the Evans estate that had been left to Lily upon her parents deaths had also been transferred to the Headmaster and liquidated. Personal belongings of James and Lily were listed in the small, goblin script, and showed that all items had been auctioned off. Even small, inconsequential things like Harry's baby clothes and toys had been sold.

Only two million in assets were shown, and Lucius guessed that Thomas and his son may have committed much of the rest of the estate while they were alive to the cause of Light. On both sides of the war, many wealthy families were poor due to their over-generous natures. Abraxas Malfoy had committed nearly half of the Malfoy wealth to the Dark Lord, but, as Lucius would admit without embarrassment, the Malfoys were very old money, as the Blacks were, and had money even they couldn't account for.

Lucius snapped the parchment back at Snape who sent it floating back to its place on his desk. "By what right did Dumbledore manage that?" asked Lucius. He sipped at his cooling tea, and was irritated that he felt the need for more whiskey.

Snape merely shook his head. "I cannot say. I have written to the goblins asking just that question, but they have not replied, yet. I am loathe to dig further as it is possible that Dumbledore might learn of my inquiries and find reason to distrust me."

After several quiet minutes in which Lucius rid himself of the cold tea, he remarked, "Well, if you are going to do the Cruor mea Cruor, then Potter's estate is no matter. Harry will be your son and heir."

Snape stared at the fire. "I will do anything to keep Harry safe, but he should have something of Lily's... and... Potter's." Snape recalled the invisibility cloak that Dumbledore had. Harry would probably never see it, now.

Lucius turned and Summoned the list from the goblins at Gringotts that Snape had just returned to his desk. "Allow me to keep this, Severus. I will have another agent see what he might be able to recover." He sighed, feeling the exhaustion of the day overtake him. Rising, he laid a hand upon Snape's shoulder. "Saturday morning, Severus."

Snape nodded, still staring at the flames in the fire. He never saw Lucius leave his quarters, and he had forgotten to ask about what Dumbledore had been angered at.

Saturday, Oct. 5, 1991

Harry, Hermione, and Draco were sitting on the steps to the entrance of Hogwarts. They had just finished breakfast, and Harry and Draco were trying to think up some entertainment so they could avoid their weekend homework. Hermione was half-listening to them as she read her Transfiguration textbook.

"We could go look at the monster," Draco tossed out there.

Hermione's head shot up and she glared in warning at the two boys. "You heard what Professor Snape told us. Do you want to get into trouble with him?"

Draco frowned at Hermione. Harry replied, "Let's just try and forget about it, okay?"

"But don't you think we ought to show it to Hermione?" persisted Draco.

"I don't want to see it!" she stated.

"Just drop it, Draco," said Harry with irritation. He rubbed the heel of his hand against his scar.

"What's wrong, Harry?" asked Hermione.

"I don't..."

"P-p-pardon me, ch-ch-children," stuttered Professor Quirrell as he stepped out of the castle. He paused and look down at them. Harry winced and Draco scowled. The DADA professor tried to smile at them, but it was weak and insincere. He chose to walk quickly away from them.

"Harry?" Hermione asked softly when their DADA professor was some distance down the path that led to the gates of Hogwarts.

Harry rubbed his scar and then shook his head. "I'm fine."

Hermione was going to press the point, but a sharp nudge and a scowl from Draco made her sigh and stick her nose back in her book.

Draco wrinkled his nose. "He stinks."

"Yeah," Harry agreed. His scar still ached, but it was fading. He resisted rubbing it again. "He smells so badly of garlic I wonder if he's trying to ward off vampires."

"Could be, but there aren't any vampires at Hogwarts," replied Draco.

"Vampires aren't real, are they?" Harry asked in disbelief.

Hermione intoned, with a mocking, deep voice, "I hear rumours that Professor Snape is a vampire."

That sent all three of them into peals of laughter. The rumours about Snape being a vampire were an old one, and a flimsy one. Really, the only thing anyone could pin the man down on were his black clothes. Many children had seen him eat, and everyone, including those that weren't Slytherin, knew that the wizard must have his morning cup of coffee. Draco was sure vampires didn't care for coffee, and Hermione gave him a knowledgeable nod.

"Hasn't anyone ever seen him out in the daylight?" asked Harry with a touch of sarcasm. After all, their teacher had been to the little league tryouts and that was a sunny afternoon!

"I'm rather fond of the sunshine," spoke a familiar voice behind them. All three yelped or squeaked and turned to face the teacher they'd been discussing. He lifted his hand and began to curl each finger down as he recited, "I've never drank a student's blood in detention, I have a reflection, I do not have a bat as a familiar, nor am I a bat Animagus, and it is werewolves that howl at the moon, not vampires."

Draco snickered and Harry smiled. Hermione blushed for having brought the silly subject up.

"Shouldn't you three be running around like young maniacs avoiding your homework until Sunday?" he asked sternly.

"I'm studying for Transfiguration, sir," Hermione asserted.

"So I see, Miss Granger," he frowned down at the textbook. "You really do need to play more." He summoned the textbook and her bookbag. Letting out a reluctant protest, she tried to snatch the book out of the air. Snape put the textbook into the bookbag and then shrunk it and pocketed it. He said, "It will be waiting for you after dinner. Mr. Malfoy, Mr. Potter, if you go down to the Standing Stones, look around their bases. You'll find some interesting pebbles. I'm certain, Miss Granger, that you'll be able to identify them." Snape then shooed the three children off the steps and watched them as they ran down a path towards a curious set of Standing Stones that one passed right before reaching the Quidditch pitch.

Renewing his Warming Charm on his outer cloak, he pulled on his gloves and made his way down the path to the gate where he Disapparated.

A few seconds later, Snape was in front of Malfoy Manor. He passed through the wards and walked up to the front door and firmly knocked. Only a few moments passed before the door was opened by a house elf that showed him in and to the parlor where Lucius was going over some paperwork. Upon the older man's nose were a set of silver rimmed spectacles with half-moon shaped lenses.

"Reading glasses already, Lucius?" Snape needed.

"For a little while," he said folding the spectacles and tucking them into an inner pocket. "I have an appointment with an Oculist in Paris next year who has created some very fascinating spell work to aid in correcting the vision in aging eyes."

"It sounds experimental," Snape said with some skepticism.

Lucius nodded as he rolled up his paperwork and tucked that into an inner pocket as well. "It is, but the Healer has a sterling reputation and I quite hate these glasses."

Lucius led Snape to the Floo. Snape threw in the glittering, black powder. "Mrs. Figg's home, Privet Drive!"

Nearly a minute later there came Mrs. Figg's bright voice, "Severus, dear! Is that you?"

Lucius cut his snicker short as Snape scowled at him. "Mrs. Figg, may we come through?"

"Of course, dear. Come along!" she called gaily.

"You first, dear," chuckled Lucius.

"Shut up," muttered Snape as he stepped through.

Mrs. Figg assisted the two wizards with advice as they transfigured their clothing into more modern looking Muggle clothing. Both wore trousers and boots. Lucius wore a more formal looking suit beneath an expensive, handmade wool coat. Snape wore a simple cotton shirt, a tie, and a suit coat jacket that matched his trousers. He wore a longer coat of heavy, pressed felt. They were then ready to visit the Dursleys.

Petunia Dursley was in her perfectly clean kitchen baking cookies to go with the cake she had just finished. Dudley was upstairs chatting online with his friends and probably playing his latest computer game with them. Vernon was in his favourite chair in the living room, on his third beer, as he watched a game. When a commercial came on he flipped to another game and watched that for a few minutes.

At first, no one heard the precise three knocks upon the front door. A second time, Vernon heard it, but he ignored it. He never opened the door. It wasn't his job. A third time and it was Petunia, just as she was taking out a sheet full of cookies, that heard the knock.

"I'll get it, Vernon, dear. Don't bother yourself!" she called from the kitchen. Petunia quickly divested herself of apron and oven gloves and trotted quickly out of the kitchen, and to the front door. She primped her hair, put on her best smile of welcome, and opened the door before her visitors could knock for a fourth time.

Petunia's smile began to falter as she eyed the two, rather official looking men on her doorstep. One had absolute hair of white that was neatly tied back at the nape of his neck. He smiled unctuously at Petunia. The man's companion was much more sullen and had the air of a salesman about him. Petunia's smile was now gone.

"Yes?" she asked falteringly. "Is there something I may do for you?"

Lucius spoke, and to both Snape and Petunia's surprise, he held out what appeared to be a small, plastic holder for Muggle ID. "Wizards' Children's Services, Mrs. Dursley. Might we come in?"

At the mention of the word wizard, Petunia frowned darkly. A hard look came into her eyes and her thin lips pursed together tightly. She did not reply to Lucius, but turned to her husband.

"Vernon! It's them!" She screechingly hissed.

Even though his wife's voice was a hissing whisper, Vernon knew that tone and it ripped through his pleasant beer induced buzz, sobering him up instantly. He sat up, and as quickly as he could with his bulk, he got up from his chair and went to the door. He stepped between Petunia and the offending freaks.

"You took the boy to school, so we're done with him," sneered Vernon. Snape recoiled as spittle flew from the man's mouth.

"Might we come in and discuss this, Mr. Dursley?" Lucius' demeanor was open and friendly, but there was steel and threat in his voice. Vernon backed up quickly and Petunia had to step out of the small hallway to avoid getting smashed by her husband.

"Get in!" snapped Vernon. He watched with beady eyes as the two wizards waltzed in as easy of you please. Vernon slammed the front door shut.

Lucius sat down in Vernon's favorite chair while Snape disdained all of the furniture and conjured his own; a simple wooden chair. He sat primly, opposite Lucius. Vernon and Petunia seated themselves on the sofa. Snape noticed that the sofa creaked ominously on Vernon's end. He was tempted to nudge the distressed wood so it would drop the fat man, but Snape stayed his wand. He needed the Dursleys' signature. Retribution would come later when there was no way possible that Dumbledore could interfere.

Vernon spoke again before Lucius could, revealing another transgression by Albus, "That old one, Dumbledore, he wrote us some ridiculous letter telling us that Harry was well. I wrote that old

fart back and told him, and now I'll tell you, we don't want that freak to return!" Snape stared, his astonishment only showing for a moment. "If you're here to tell me I have some sort of responsibility to him, I'll tell you what I tried to tell Dunneldore when he dumped that thing on my doorstep; he isn't ours!"

Freak! Thing! Snape wanted to hurt them, but a warning glare from Lucius calmed him. He scowled at the Dursleys.

"We have come to tell you that Harry Potter will not be returning, Mr. Dursley," Lucius replied, as though completely oblivious to the fat man's indignation.

Vernon hesitated. He frowned. "Dunneldore changed his mind?"

Snape interrupted. He wanted to know what 'Dunneldore' had told the Dursleys. "What did Albus Dumbledore tell you?"

Petunia bit out, "He told us that her son was coming back in the summer and that we weren't to touch him."

Vernon sneered, "Went on about abuse and all that, but that old freak obviously doesn't understand what a trial the boy is. There's nothing wrong with a smack or two..." The large man halted in his justification of his abuses towards Harry when he saw the look of hatred in the dark man's unflinching gaze.

Lucius rose from the recliner and held a form out to the Dursleys. He felt as angry as Snape did, but he had to get the younger man out of there before he decided to indulge that anger. After all, it was a bit too soon for that.

"What's this?" Vernon asked staring at the form, but not taking it.

"By signing this, you will be giving up all rights to Harry Potter," Lucius summarised the form simply.

A glint of pleasure appeared in Petunia's eye. "So, he won't be coming back?"

"Never," replied Lucius with an oily tinge to his voice and a similar, oily smile upon his face.

Vernon still hadn't taken the form and when Petunia reached for it, he grasped her wrist to stop her. "That Dumbledore said something about protections, Pet. I haven't a problem in letting the boy be someone else's problem, but are we safe?" He glared at the two wizards. "We don't want any of your kind coming around us anymore. Are we safe?"

"I can assure you, Mr. Dursley, that there is no one in our world that is at all interested in you and your family." Lucius then glanced quickly over at Snape. He gave the younger man a slight smirk that neither Vernon nor Petunia saw.

Petunia snatched the form, rose, and went into the kitchen where she had a drawer with a pen. She took that out and quickly signed the form. She then marched from the kitchen, back to the living room and shoved the pen and the form at her husband.

"Pet," he began dubiously.

"Sign it, Vernon," she ordered. "I don't want him back in our house and I don't want him anywhere near Dudley."

Vernon took the form and the pen, and then signed it. Lucius plucked it from the fat man's sausage fingers, rolled it up neatly, and gave the Dursleys his most charming smile. "Before we depart, I'd like to make certain that all of Mr. Potter's belongings are returned to him. Did he leave anything behind? Is there, by chance, anything you might have that belonged to his parents?"

"There's nothing here," declared Petunia. "And, I never wanted anything of Lily's. You may leave. Now."

Neither Snape nor Lucius bothered to return to Mrs. Figg's house to use her Floo. They both Apparated on the spot to Malfoy Manor.

Dobby the house elf at Malfoy Manor brought tea for his master and his guest. Snape was reading the document that the Dursleys signed. He had read it countless times before, but he did so again to help him to not think about the Dursleys dismissive attitude towards Harry.

"Lucius, Harry is without a valid guardian, now. Since it will take me a little over a week to brew the potion," Snape did not mention that it



had taken the week just to assemble the ingredients. "Cannot anyone lay claim to the boy?"

Lucius settled into his favourite chair and stretched out his legs. "Check the document again, Severus. It might be a bit obscured by the legalese and flourishes, but you have temporary guardianship of Harry Potter."

Snape squinted at the document and finally found the section, written in the tiniest of scripts. Lucius Summoned a magnifying glass and handed it to Snape so he could read the tiny print. After several minutes, Snape glanced up.

"So, I have 30 days from today in which to finalise adoption," he concluded.

"And, you will note that your guardianship is confidential. No one, but my contact in the WCS, will know that you are Harry's guardian." Lucius smiled with self-satisfaction. "If Dumbledore decides to get nosy, he'll find nothing to answer his questions."

Snape sighed, "But he would know that his guardianship of Harry is being usurped."

"True," nodded Lucius. "However, I have faith in the Headmaster's arrogance. He believes himself to rightfully be Harry's guardian, and thus he will have no reason to think otherwise. Although, I would not put it past him to remonstrate with you, Severus."

Snape looked up at this and recalled Lucius' remark about the Headmaster's dark looks during the little league tryouts. "You think he suspects something already," stated Snape.

"Not an adoption or anything of that ilk. I believe that Dumbledore does not care for the bond that is developing between you and Harry." Lucius tapped his lower lip as his grey eyes sparkled thoughtfully. "If he had been Sorted into Gryffindor, would the Headmaster have insinuated himself more into the child's life?"

"Undoubtedly," Snape confirmed. "Albus seemed the paragon of concern until Harry was Sorted. Minerva is not one who is close to her Lions and Harry was obviously looking for someone to champion

his cause, whatever it entailed." Snape grimaced slightly as he thought of how his treatment of Harry, had he not had the chance to get to know the child, would have played right into Dumbledore's machinations; sheltering the boy from the big, bad, greasy git of the dungeons. It soured his stomach.

The Standing Stones were located along a path that led to the Quidditch pitch. They were several yards off the path and many students over the years had found the stones to be a place to play or to seek shade during warmer days.

The Standing Stones consisted of nine stones total of roughly hewn bluestone in the shape of tall rectangles, the tallest being five times the height of Draco. Only five of the stones still stood in a vague circle. The four remaining stones had fallen. One had fallen against its standing neighbor, a second had fallen into the circle, a third had also fallen against its neighbor, but it had broken into three large pieces – two within the circle, and one just outside it, the fourth stone had fallen just behind another of the still standing stones.

Each of the three friends went to one of the still standing stones and began to examine the many pebbles at its base while Hermione recited from memory their history.

"In Hogwarts: A History, it says that the stones were here before the Founders built Hogwarts. The Founders believed that it was Merlin who had constructed the circle which was similar to Stonehenge, but it held a much more powerful magical vibration."

Harry interrupted Hermione. "Are the stones magical?" he asked.

Hermione touched the stone she was near. "Well... I think they're considered magical. Bluestone is just a form of limestone that if you throw water on it, it turns dark blue and limestone really doesn't have any sort of magical power itself."

"You're wrong," said Draco shaking his head. "See, this is what you Muggleborn don't know. Everything in nature has power. It's neither light nor dark, it's just power. When the Founders were looking for a place to build Hogwarts, they were all practitioners of Elemental magic."

"Earth, wind, fire, and water," nodded Hermione. "But magic isn't really referred to as Elemental anymore."

"It ought to be," said Draco. "All of our magic is based upon the Elements but back in the Founders days a witch or wizard was defined by the Element they were most skilled at manipulating."

"Their magic was more specialised," concluded Harry correctly. "So what does that have to do with the stones being magical?"

Draco stood and looked to Hermione and Harry who were waiting for his answer. Draco placed a hand against one of the stones. "That's obvious; earth. The stones are from the earth and that magic is one of the most powerful. The Earth connects everything in the world."

Harry smiled at that as he touched the stone he was near. He could feel, just barely, as his magic reached towards the stone and he felt a pleasant surge of belonging overwhelm him. Draco snickered at the sudden expression of bliss on his friend's face.

"See? Harry's magic knows these stones still are magical," declared Draco.

Hermione was curious and walked over to Harry. "Do you feel something, Harry?" she asked.

Harry didn't answer right away as he searched for the words to describe the sensation. "It's... uh... just a rightness..." He couldn't explain how he felt soothed, grounded, and how his mind felt like it had been cleansed. The words were there, but it felt intensely personal, like a really good secret that you want to keep as long as possible to yourself. Harry removed his hand from the stone. "Could you feel anything?"

Hermione touched the stone, but shook her head. "You can't," said Draco. "You're a mud... sorry!" he exclaimed at Hermione and Harry's frowns. "I mean, both your parents were born without magic so you can't feel it. Father says you have to have at least two parents that are magical, even if there are Muggles in your ancestry."

Hermione considered this. "So, if I married a wizard, my children would be able to sense Elemental magic?"

Draco nodded.

The conversation seemingly ended, they went back to looking for interesting pebbles. After several minutes, Draco was excited when he thought he found, "Gold! It's gold!"

His other two friends hurried over to examine the pebble that had angular pieces of what did appear to be gold jutting out from it. Hermione took the stone from Draco. "It isn't gold. It's pyrite."

"That looks like gold," Draco said stubbornly as he snatched the rock back.

"Fool's Gold," insisted Hermione. "It just looks like gold, but it really isn't."

"It's gold, so I'm keeping it." He stuffed the rock into his pocket and bent down eagerly to find more.

Within a half an hour they found granite, mica, feldspar, a geode that they broke open on one of the fallen Standing Stones, and more pyrite. By then, their fingers were getting cold and they were ready for a warm fire and some lunch. Upon their return, they ran into Snape and Lucius walking up the long pathway from the entrance gates.

"Did you find anything?" asked Snape.

"I found gold!" Draco announced as he pulled out the three stones he'd unearthed that he was determined would be gold.

Lucius picked up one of the stones and examined it. "Pyrite," he stated. At his son's look of disappointment, he added. "Nevertheless, a valuable stone out of which to fashion amulets of protection." Draco's face brightened. Lucius gave his son a small smile. "Keep these and when you are home for the holidays I shall show you how to make amulets for yourself, and your two friends."

"Great!" Although the stones were not gold, Draco was happily anticipating the holidays for when he and his father would turn the stones into something very useful.

"Professor," asked Hermione as she held out one of the broken pieces of geode. "I wasn't sure what this was. Do you know?"

Snape took the geode and examined the small, purple crystals. A brief smile appeared at the edge of his mouth. "Amethyst, Miss Granger. If you use it in an amulet, it will allow you to clear your mind and focus your magic. If you grind up the amethyst, it can be used to create the base for most poison reversing potions. An excellent find." He complimented the girl and she blushed.

"Sir," spoke up Harry, "could you make an amulet with the pyrite and the amethyst that would protect you, yet help with magic like... like what you've been teaching me and Draco?" Neither Harry nor Draco had told Hermione of their Occlumency lessons so Harry was being cautious in mentioning it by name.

Snape put his hand to Harry's back and ushered them all inside as it was getting colder. As they walked he replied, "I think that such an amulet would be quite efficacious." Harry gave him a questioning look and Snape smirked. "An amulet would provide a desirable result, Harry."

Harry smiled and was relieved. So far Occlumency lessons seemed to have kept the horrible nightmare with the unicorn from returning. Snape didn't know, but Harry was still experiencing regular nightmares. At least they weren't every night. He could only think that a powerful amulet could help him do better with Occlumency. Maybe, he thought hopefully, I can learn how to make amulets with Draco.

The Trio were about to split away from the two wizards and towards the Great Hall for lunch, when Lucius and Snape motioned for them to follow. They headed down into the dungeons where they went into Snape's quarters.

"Hang up your cloaks and get in front of the fire," directed Lucius. He sent his outer cloak to the line of hooks on the back of the door to Snape's quarters. Snape was already there, hanging his cloak. He was joined by the three children who divested themselves of cloaks, hats, and gloves.

"Boots, too," ordered Snape as he looked down at their muddied boots. Harry sat on the floor to take his off. Draco leaned against the

door to slip his boots off. Hermione tried a charm to remove her boots, but only managed one boot and the sock went with it. To the snickers of both Harry and Draco she scowled, sat down where Harry had sat on the floor, retrieved her wayward sock and put it back on, then took off her remaining boot. She then joined her friends who were already sitting close to the hearth with their feet nearest the warm fire. A few minutes later, Snape was draping each of them with warm shawls he'd Transfigured from clean handkerchiefs. He was quietly thanked by each child.

Lucius seated himself in one of the wingback chairs while Snape went into the kitchen to prepare tea for himself and Lucius, and hot chocolate for the Trio.

Once everyone had a mug of something hot in their hands, Snape allowed a few long minutes to pass before he spoke. He was blunt, but he watched Harry carefully as he informed the boy that they had been to visit his relatives.

Harry couldn't stop the flinch that came, but he was able to temper it. Even so, he was a little confused by the ghostly feelings of old aches and pains that mostly his uncle had inflicted. Those faint reminders of his past threatened to send him into a panic and he tried the breathing exercises his professor had taught he and Draco.

Snape was pleased to see Harry's breathing even out after he noted the panicked hitching. Harry was using what he learned in Occlumency lessons to calm himself. He did notice there was still a tightening of the muscles signaling that Harry was still nervous. Snape further enlightened him as to what the visit had been about.

"Your aunt and uncle have signed away their rights to you." Again, Snape was being blunt on purpose. Lucius, by the glare he was throwing the Potions Master's way, didn't approve. However, Snape thought of Harry's family as a dirtied bandage that needed to be ripped away quickly to prevent further harm to a festering wound. It was harsh, but he didn't want the boy to hold onto any irrational fear that he might be sent back to that home. Or, Merlin forbid, he didn't want Harry to dwell on the possibility that someday his family might accept him.

Harry couldn't speak for the panic was welling up in him like a sour stomach trying to expel its contents. All thought of his breathing

exercises were forgotten as he silently wondered about where he'd live in the summer. Would anyone want him? Could he stay at Hogwarts? Or, God no, I'm going to an orphanage!

Uppermost in his mind, though, was the sickening thought that his family, as despicable as they were, didn't want him. Nobody wanted him. Nobody cared...

Harry turned sideways so he could look into his teacher's eyes. The child's expression was full of turmoil, confusion, fear, so many emotions that it made Snape sick at heart.

"Harry," Snape said softly, leaning slightly forward, "I care." A very private man, he was none too happy about having to show his feelings for the frightened boy in front of Draco and Hermione, but they were Harry's friends. Snape knew that fear would linger and doubt would plague the boy and it was up to his best friends to assure and to remind him that Snape would see to his welfare; that someone did, indeed, care. In time, he was certain that Harry would realise that more than the Dark Man cared about him. His friends cared, too.

Harry took a few measured breaths as he nodded at Snape. Hermione laid a hand on his forearm. "S-sir?" Annoyed by his stutter, Harry took another few breaths before continuing his question. "What about the summer? Where will I live?"

Snape couldn't reveal to Harry the plans for the adoption just yet. If anything were to go wrong, he didn't want to be the one to crush the child's hopes. The least he could do was to assure Harry that he would have someplace to live. It wasn't enough, though.

Draco piped up, "You can come live with us!"

Lucius silently balked. He had been unprepared for his son to offer Harry sanctuary with the Malfoys. Draco turned a pleading glance towards his father, but he could not back up his son. "Mr. Potter might be able to visit, Draco, but he will not be living with us. Considering our... diverse histories... it would not be a prudent move."

Although Lucius would not hesitate in offering Harry a home, should that be needed, it would be a terrible risk. The Malfoys were slowly

gaining a respectable foothold in wizarding society, but it could be years before the family was once more trusted by good folk. For him, an ex-Death Eater to harbor the Boy-Who-Lived would cause many who had a tenuous trust in Malfoy senior, to falter and return to open distrust and dislike.

Snape was an ex-Death Eater as well, but the fact that the Headmaster of Hogwarts, a powerful wizard, and head of the Wizengamot had vouched for and put his trust in the young wizard, spoke volumes. The man had also been, and still was, a teacher to many young students. They may not consider Snape their favourite of instructors, but Lucius had met past students of the younger man, and not a one did not have a measure of respect for the man in black.

There might be some arched eyebrows, gossip, too, but eventually most of the wizarding world would accept Snape's adopting of Harry Potter.

Harry, though, was still worried. He didn't like not knowing what to expect and although he believed that Professor Snape would find someplace for him to live during the summer, it unnerved him that he didn't know where that someplace was NOW. Wherever it was it would mean learning new rules, the habits of his new family, and there was no certainty that they would even like him. What if he wound up someplace worse than a cupboard?

Harry put the remainder of his hot chocolate on the floor in front of him and pulled the throw tighter around his shoulders as he stared into the mesmerising flames of the fire.

Snape scowled. Harry's fears and worry were becoming a tangible thing in the small living room. He still did not feel it safe to mention the adoption, but he needed to sidetrack the boy.

"Harry, I could use your assistance in brewing a potion," stated Snape.

This roused Harry from his thoughts and he turned, once again, to face his teacher. "What sort of potion, sir?"

"One that I require your help with," Snape replied elusively and with a knowing smirk.



Harry shrugged, then nodded. "Okay. I'll help, sir."

Friday, Oct. 11, 1991

Harry spent the entire week either after classes or after dinner with Snape in his private lab brewing a very complicated potion. He still didn't know what it was, but he was fascinated by the ingredients, many of which were magical ones he'd never heard of, and it was an odd potion that not only required three different brewings, but also had to be distilled four times.

Harry's favourite part in the entire process had to be using the distiller. It was a delicate construct of shiny brass scaffolding that encompassed various phials, philtres, tubes, and coils of gold and silver. The first distillation took a rather sludgy looking potion (the first brewing) through the distiller where it went through a rainbow of colour changes before ending in the heated cauldron that waited for it, where it turned perfectly clear.

By Friday they were working on the third brewing process when Snape discovered to his disgust, that he was out of Christmas beetle carapaces. Using a very delicate modification of a Suspension Charm, Snape put a halt to the brewing.

"Can I go with you, sir?" asked Harry as he watched his teacher put on his outer cloak.

"Are you not forgetting that you have Quidditch practice today, Harry?" Snape reminded the boy.

"I... yes... but I'd like..." Harry's tongue tumbled over his words as he chickened out on telling his teacher that he'd much rather go to Diagon Alley than practice for the game on Sunday."

"I won't be gone long, Harry. I ought to return in time to watch your practice." Harry sighed, sort of happy that his professor would be watching, but disappointed that Snape didn't insist upon him going. Snape frowned, wondering what the boy's drooping shoulders could mean.

Snape slipped on his gloves and then asked, "You are looking forward to your first game, are you not?"

"Yeah, I am," he said with a truthful grin. Maybe I'm hanging around him too much, Harry thought to himself as he wiped at some non-existent dust. Dark Man just needs a break from me. Harry stood. "I guess I'll see you later, sir."

Snape watched the small boy leave his lab. His expression was worrisome, but he needed those Christmas beetles. Pushing thoughts of Harry to the side, Snape made his way out of his lab, secured it with several wards, and then left the castle.

Some hours later, with the newly purchased Christmas beetle carapaces stored away, Snape made his way out to the Quidditch pitch to watch the practice.

Two teams had been created from those that tried out for the little league. The captains, with the aid of the team, devised names for each of their teams.

Fred and George Weasley had been paired up with Corey Vaisey from Slytherin and despite the fourth years hard glances generally aimed towards the two Gryffindors, they tempered each other well. Their team had named themselves the Silver Dragons and consisted of Harry as Seeker, Draco and Teddy Nott as Chasers, and Ernie McMillan from Hufflepuff making up the third of the Chasers. Justin Finch-Fletchly also of Hufflepuff was a Beater and from Ravenclaw Terry Boot was the second Beater. The Keeper, and lone Gryffindor, was Neville Longbottom.

The other team captained by Betty Greenhorn of Hufflepuff and Sryan Toss of Ravenclaw had named their team the Growling Pixies. Their team was made up of Ronald Weasley as Seeker, Seamus Finnegan and Dean Thomas as Chasers, Morag MacDougal of Ravenclaw making up the third Chaser. The Beaters were Wayne Hopkins of Hufflepuff and Millicent Bulstrode of Slytherin. Lastly, the Keeper was Mandy Brockelhurst of Ravenclaw.

The Silver Dragons and the Growling Pixies played a good practice game. Snape thought all of the players to be well matched, including Neville and Mandy who basically allowed the other team to score because both kept dodging the Quaffle instead of knocking it back into play.

Snape was also pleased that the numbers had worked out to allow only two teams instead of four and those two teams were each made up of players from all four Houses. Nearly the entire school had come to watch the practice and Snape, and other staff members, were gratified to see that cheers came from all four Houses for each team. The older students seemed to understand that although the Quidditch Little League was for the youngest in the school, it meant as much to the first years as the regular Hogwarts Quidditch meant to its players.

As the captains directed their players to the showers after the practice match, Snape joined Lucius on the pitch.

"What do you think, Severus? Do you see a clear winner?" asked Lucius.

"Growling Pixies," piped up Minerva McGonagall behind them.

Snape gave the older woman a good-natured sneer as he asked, "Is that because the Silver Dragons have the unfortunate Longbottom as their Keeper?"

"Mr. Longbottom is regrettably no worse than Miss Brockelhurst is," commented Minerva. Turning, the older witch watched as Hermione, still in the stands, gathered up her books. "I had hoped that Miss Granger might tryout. I think she would have done better than Miss Brockelhurst."

"Not everyone views Quidditch with the same zeal as you do, Minerva," Snape countered.

Minerva turned back and gave her colleague an imperious scowl. "Even had the girl not made one of the teams it would have shown loyalty towards her House. I am, frankly, disappointed that Miss Granger has not made more of an effort in Gryffindor."

"Miss Granger is being shunned by nearly her entire House, Minerva. The girls in her dorm constantly ridicule the child. Have you never questioned their excessive points losses and detentions?" snapped Snape.

Minerva narrowed her gaze at the younger wizard, "As you are always targeting my Lions, Severus, I rarely view your justifications

for taking points and giving detentions. I merely balance that by doing the same to your Snakes."

Snape was so angry he could not speak. It was Lucius who intervened, "Considering that I expect the Board to approve Miss Granger's re-Sorting in a few days..."

Minerva crossed her arms over her bosom and glared at the patrician, "The Board does not have the petition, yet, Mr. Malfoy."

Lucius' eyes narrowed sharply, "And why is that, madame?"

"Miss Granger's Head of House must approve the petition before it goes before the Board of Governors. As I am her Head of House, that means I must approve the petition. I have not. Yet." Minerva did not back down from the elder Malfoy's scowl.

"She is unhappy..." began Lucius.

Minerva interrupted, "Many first years are not happy, at first, Mr. Malfoy. Like any other child, Miss Granger will adjust." With that the Deputy Headmistress spun aside to stride away from the two wizards.

Lucius grasped the older witch by the forearm to stop her. Snape's eyes widened at the risk his friend was taking. Minerva, even at her age, was a formidable duelist.

"Miss Granger has been hexed twice, madame. What if she gets hurt?" demanded Lucius.

Minerva yanked her arm from Lucius grip. Snape could see a portion of the witch's wand in her hand. "Does that truly matter to you, sir?" she seethed. "Isn't this sham of a sponsorship just another political bid to ingratiate your family name into polite society?"

Lucius did not answer the older woman's question. He merely threatened, "Hermione's welfare is on your shoulders, then, Deputy Headmistress. If she is harmed, in any way, by her House, you will have more than just the Board's condemnation to deal with!" It was Lucius who strode away, not hearing Minerva's indignant 'hmmph'.

"Was that wise, Minerva?" asked Snape a little too smoothly.

Her colleague's subtle, and unspoken rebuke, was lost upon the Gryffindor. "That man needs to learn that he can't bully everyone to his way of thinking!"

"And you, Minerva? Are you that adamant about keeping Miss Granger in your House that you would go against her happiness?" chided Snape.

Minerva, who had remained watching the disappearing figure of Lucius Malfoy spun sharply to face Snape. "This has nothing to do with the girl's happiness, Severus! Miss Granger is making her life difficult by not conforming to those around her. And, she has made it worse by thinking she can bring in adults to enforce her selfish desires!"

It was Snape's turn to aim his outrage upon the older woman. "Selfish? Do you have blinders on when it comes to what your Lions have been doing to that child? That youngest Weasley boy has yet to hide those looks of hatred and revulsion he aims, daily, at the girl. I have no doubt he'll try to hurt her if he thinks he can get away with it!"

Minerva scoffed, "The Weasley children are pranksters, Severus! Not a one of them would hurt another. They aren't bullies."

Snape was stung by the older woman's tone. He had, unfortunately, heard it before. Aimed at him when he had tried complaining to the Deputy Headmistress that four of her Lions were bullying him.

"You had better see to it that Miss Granger receives no injury, Minerva," Snape's low voice cut across sharply, full of warning, "or you will find my voice to be one of the complaints to the Board."

Snape turned angrily away, leaving Minerva to bluster her indignation to the cool breezes.

Sunday, Oct. 13, 1991

Sunday afternoon brought the very first Quidditch Little League match. It was a bit of a rather chilly, but fun carnival atmosphere as parents arrived to watch the game. Hot chocolate, tea, and coffee

were all being served by the house elves to the spectators in the stands and whatever other snacks or drinks that might be requested.

Hermione sat with the Malfoys so she could cheer on the Silver Dragons with them. Snape had wanted to sit with the Malfoys but he'd been getting increasingly dark looks from the Headmaster, so he sat with the staff in the staff box.

Dumbledore stood when the teams assembled on the pitch, pointed his wand at his throat, and his voice rang out clear over all the spectators.

"Welcome students and welcome to the parents of our little leaguers. Today we are holding the very first match between Hogwarts very own Quidditch Little League, the Growling Pixies versus the Silver Dragons!" The Headmaster waited until the cheers and applause died down before continuing. "Mr. Malfoy?" Dumbledore called down to the aristocratic coach in his splendid uniform. "Are we ready?"

Lucius glanced quickly at his two teams, and then at each of his coaches who would be referees during the game. They all nodded to him and so he tossed the Snitch into the air and then jogged off the pitch.

The small, gold Snitch darted teasingly between Ronald and Harry before shooting straight up as high as it was allowed to go. Ronald sneered at Harry while Harry just grinned and went after the Snitch. With a frustrated growl, the redhead was behind him.

Draco was a very good Chaser and Lucius found himself, oddly, cheering twice, out loud, when his son shot the Quaffle past Mandy Brockelhurst. He chided himself for doing so. He was the coach of both teams, so he needed to encourage both sides. However, when Draco scored a third goal, he shouted in delight, again. And then tried, unsuccessfully, to cover it with a cough.

Snape had his eyes upon Harry and was unaware of the slight smile that resided at one corner of his mouth as Harry flew like an expert on his broom. The whorls and loops did make his heart stop a few times, but nearly halfway through the game, he felt so confident in the boy's flying skills that he wasn't worrying quite as much as he had been.

The score was a close one with 90 for the Silver Dragons and 110 for the Growling Pixies. Everyone was cheering for the Snitch to be caught before time ran out. Harry could have caught it a few times, but he wanted to allow the scores to increase. He and Ronald did rather well in keeping each other away from the Snitch.

With the crowd shouting and cheering on Harry and the youngest Weasley, Harry made his bid for the Snitch and the second he saw it, he raced after it.

Just as Harry was reaching for the Snitch and victory, his broom dipped down sharply out of his control and then to the left. Harry grabbed the front of his broom to prevent himself from falling as he re-balanced himself. There was no chance for him to do that as his broom shot up, then down again and began shaking him roughly side to side like a dog with a chew toy.

Harry tried to hold on but it was impossible. Unaware of the screams and shouts the broom viciously shook, jerked, and Harry was soon falling.

Due to the little league regulations the players could only fly half the height that the older players and players in the professional leagues flew. Even so the limit was thirty feet above ground. Harry's broom had shot down half that distance before shaking him loose.

In the stands, Hermione's eyes darted to the spectators the moment Harry's broom began moving erratically. She was confused to see Snape, his eyes like a hawk upon Harry, as he chanted something. Fearing the worst, she slipped away from the Malfoys and towards the teachers box.

Hermione approached the teachers box from underneath and that's when she heard Professor Quirrell's voice; low, steady, and not a whisper of a stutter. Hermione couldn't hear Professor Snape, though.

Making her decision quickly (and hoping she was right), she took out her wand, pointed it at the grey drape of Professor Quirrell's robes, and quietly spoke, "Lacarnum Inflamarae!"

A small ball of blue flame shot from the end of Hermione's wand and lit the hem of Professor Quirrell's robes on fire. Within seconds there

was a shout from the stuttering man as all the teachers in the teachers box scrambled to put out the fire.

"Miss Granger!" Hermione froze. Glancing through the steps she could see her outraged Head of House glaring daggers at her. "Down on the pitch! Now!"

Hermione noted that Snape was nowhere to be seen.

~Seconds before Hermione set Quirrell's robes to flame~

Snape wanted to investigate who was causing Harry's broom to buck and roll but he couldn't. He had to keep his eyes upon the boy and to keep chanting the counter-curse. Too soon he realised, that it wasn't enough. One more sharp jerk from the broom and Harry could no longer hang onto it. His teammates made a mad bid in trying to catch him. Fred and George and Corey dove into the melee, casting spells to keep the firsties from all colliding with each other.

Snape broke from the teacher's box just as a voice rang out, "Arresto Momentum!"

"Finally, you old goat!" hissed Snape under his breath as he continued nearly running down the rickety stairs to Harry.

The Headmaster managed to slow Harry's fall but he couldn't stop it completely. The boy drifted, gently now, down to the ground where he settled, rather unhappily, upon the grass. He was joined, moments later, by the captains and his teammates.

"Step aside!" Snape ordered gruffly as he pushed his way through to Harry. The second he knelt with one knee beside the slightly dazed boy, Harry threw his arms around the older man. Snape hoisted Harry into his arms and stalked off towards the castle.

Fred frowned at his twin. "Did you hear what I heard?"

George echoed back, his frown a mirror of his twins, "Did you hear what I heard?"

They both nodded to each other. They had both heard the little Seeker call Snape 'daddy'.



Before either twin could muse upon Harry's imprecation, there was something new to pay attention to. Behind them they could hear their Head of House, and she was angry. With both teams now on the pitch, captains and teams, watched as Professor McGonagall dragged a wailing Hermione Granger, by her ear, to the castle. Their eyes followed as teacher and student passed, apparently oblivious to their audience.

"...from my House! Miss Granger! I can't believe your audacity! Setting fire to the robes of a teacher! There is no excuse! No excuse whatso..."

Fred and George chuckled to each other as they took a moment to watch their Head of House disappear ahead of them. "Granger's a bit of a spitfire, isn't she, Gred?" observed George.

"Indeed, Forge. We may have underestimated the little firstie."

"Didn't you hear?" demanded their youngest brother, Ronald. "That moron just lost our House 100 points!" Fred and George just laughed. They'd each lost three times that much during their years at Hogwarts.

Fred, however, gave his little brother a look of concern. The feud between the House of Gryffindor and the young Bookworm Hermione, had been doing its best to die down. Ronald, though, and his two friends, Dean and Seamus, continued to stir the pot. Fred could see by the angry expression on Ron's face that retaliation against the little girl just might get worse.

An hour later McGonagall was stepping through the doors of the Infirmary to see how Harry was. Snape quickly apprised her that except for two handfuls of splinters, which happened while he was trying to hold onto his broom, Harry had come away uninjured. Madame Pomfrey had treated the child for shock, and he was now asleep, tucked firmly beneath the white hospital sheets and blankets that smelled of lavender.

"I am glad to see that Mr. Potter came out of this relatively unscathed, Severus." Minerva said a bit too stiffly.

Snape glanced up at the older woman. "You have something to ask of me, Minerva?"

The witch actually shifted on her feet before speaking. "You had already gone down to the pitch before this happened, but... I caught Miss Granger beneath the teacher's box. She'd set fire to Professor Quirrell's robes."

Snape's shock only registered as a widening of his dark eyes. "Whyever did she do such a thing?" he asked.

Minerva shrugged, but mostly in frustration. "I wish I knew. Miss Granger refuses to tell me anything."

"And Quirrell?" asked Snape.

"Holed up in his quarters. You know how he gets if any student plays a prank on him," she mused. Snape merely nodded. It was an unfortunate fact that none of the students liked their DADA professor. To be more precise, they didn't care for how he smelled; like garlic gone bad. So far he had suffered through a series of taunts from all the Houses, and a few pranks, but none quite as injurious as setting fire to his robes. An obviously sensitive man, such teasing and pranks always sent him to his rooms where he, more than likely, wallowed in self-pity for several hours.

After several minutes of just watching Harry sleep, Minerva spoke up again. "Perhaps you can talk to her, Severus," suggested the Deputy Headmistress.

Snape turned in his chair and looked up at the severe woman. "Why me? She's one of your Lions, is she not?"

Minerva ignored the barb and replied, "Miss Granger seems to have more respect for you than for me. I'm sure it did me no good that I took 100 points from Gryffindor and gave her a week's worth of detention."

Snape smirked. No, that wouldn't help his colleague's case at all. "Send her to my office before dinner, Minerva. I'll speak to her."

Minerva gave Snape a curt, acknowledging nod, and then left the Infirmary. Snape leaned over to brush the hair that was most assuredly growing too long from the child's forehead.

By the time dinner came round, Madame Pomfrey had released Harry from the Infirmary after his nap. He felt refreshed and ready to find Draco and Hermione. He ran off, out of the Infirmary, glad to leave the antiseptic place behind.

Hermione, on the other hand, was halfway to Professor Snape's office. She had spent most of the rest of the afternoon on her bed with the curtains drawn. Professor McGonagall had forbade any and all excursions to the library so she was unable to find any respite there. For a half hour after her confinement to the Tower, her roommates had come in to tease her unmercifully. Hermione had put her pillow over her head and cried as quietly as possible.

For awhile Hermione had slept from simple, emotional exhaustion. It was only for an hour, though, so she'd retrieved her bookbag and read through her textbooks and had begun work on a Charms essay. She had planned to skip dinner, when the little note from her Head of House had arrived ordering her down to the dungeons to speak with Professor Snape.

Hermione had put on her school robes and then made her way down the stairs and into the Gryffindor common room. It was there that she unfortunately encountered Ronald Weasley.

Weasley sat by the fire, glaring at her. Dean stood up from a round ottoman he'd been sitting on and pointed a finger at her, "100 points, Granger!" he accused.

Seamus piped up, "Keep it up, Granger, and you'll have us in negatives before the official Quidditch games start!" He glared tautly and slumped down further on the other end of the sofa.

"Watch your back, you Slytherin slut," ground out Ronald.

Hermione would have hexed the boy, but her sharp eye caught sight of his wand, in his hand, merely hidden by the drape of his robes sleeve. She nearly ran from the common room with the sound of laughter fading behind her.

Several minutes later Hermione had reached Snape's office. The door was open, but she couldn't immediately see her teacher. She knocked firmly, peering in before stepping over the threshold. When

half a minute had passed without an answer, Hermione stepped into the office.

Snape's office wasn't quite a pleasant place, but it was interesting. An arched, enchanted window shone with natural sunshine through amber and green coloured, diamond shaped panes. Halfway up the arched window were shelves crossing in front of the glass. Various glass bottles of coloured, hand blown glass were upon the shelves. Some had liquids in them, others were empty. Hermione had the suspicion that these shelves and their contents were merely decoration.

Bookshelves lined two walls and for a long moment her attention was held, spellbound, as she silently read dozens of the titles on the spines. In the middle of one of the bookshelf lined walls was a section of shelves that held a disturbing collection of preserved... things. Hermione's lips grimaced at the sight and she turned away from them.

The last wall was taken up by a large fireplace in which flames burned, warming the office. Hanging over the mantle was a regal looking portrait of a dark-haired gentleman from possibly the 15th century. Hermione had no idea who he was, but he gave her a congenial nod before returning his gaze to the book he was reading.

"Thank you for being so prompt, Miss Granger," said Snape as he swept in through a door she hadn't seen before that led to his classroom. He indicated she was to take one of the two wooden chairs in front of his large desk as he seated himself behind it.

Hermione took a seat, folding her hands primly in her lap. Her back was stiff and barely touched the back of the chair.

"You may relax, Miss Granger. You are not in trouble," he remarked. The girl only relaxed slightly.

Hermione cleared her throat before asking, "Is this about what I did at the game, sir?"

He nodded. "It is, Miss Granger. I am hoping that you have some explanation for having set Professor Quirrell's robes on fire." He frowned in puzzlement. "I would not have expected such a prank from you."

Hermione's gaze dropped to her hands as she clasped them tightly together. "It wasn't a prank," she murmured.

"Then what was it?" he asked firmly.

There wasn't an immediate reply from the girl. When she did speak, it wasn't what he expected. "Sir, why were you hexing Harry?"

He blinked, giving himself a few extra seconds to form his answer. "It was a counter-spell. Someone, I do not know who, was jinxing Mr. Potter's broom."

"Someone was trying to kill him, sir," she countered softly.

"Perhaps," he spoke softly.

Hermione lifted her head as she looked directly into her teacher's eyes. "No," she said firmly. "If Harry had fallen he could have broken his neck. Someone wanted him dead." She bit her lower lip and her gaze fluttered nervously down to her lap as her hands fidgeted uneasily.

Snape watched the child, concerned about the waves of fear that nearly rolled off her visibly. He had been somewhat surprised by her declaration that someone had tried to kill Harry, but supposed that maybe he shouldn't have been as Miss Granger was a very observant child. It had irritated him that most of the staff had written off the incident as a problem of the magical restrictions on the broom for the safety of its rider. It had further rankled him when he'd gone to speak to the Headmaster about the accident and it was waved off as something that Madame Hooch would investigate 'when she had time'.

How could that old goat be so cavalier about Harry's life? Wasn't Harry Potter supposed to be the Saviour of the Wizarding World in Dumbledore's eyes?

Hermione spoke up, "Professor Quirrell was chanting, too." Snape hissed, caught off guard by the statement. "I know hardly anyone likes the professor, sir, but I really think he doesn't like Harry."

"Why do you say that?" asked Snape shrewdly. "Have there been anymore incidents in his classes?"

"Nothing like that one time, sir," she replied, almost reluctant to give away a confidence. "But Harry does get terrible headaches in class and Draco told me that he's still having nightmares. Draco can't hear them because Harry's casting a Silencing Spell, but he always gets up afterwards and paces. Or, sometimes he gets sick."

Hermione glanced worriedly at Snape as the fingers on both his hands drummed out an angry pattern on the arms of his chair. After several minutes of watching the man's expression deepen and become darker, he waved his hand at her in silent dismissal. The atmosphere was so oppressive that Hermione was happy to be on her way back to the Tower.

Snape grimaced to himself. He had hoped that Harry's nightmares were done with, but obviously not. He doubted there were anymore nightmares with the unicorn for Hagrid had informed him several days ago that the unicorns had vanished from the Forbidden Forest. Other magical animals were also nowhere to be seen, and the Centaurs, usually very hidden creatures, were in force throughout the Forest.

The Potions Master knew what he needed to do about Harry's nightmares; it was a simple charm he often used with his first years that alerted him to when a child was having a nightmare. Many of his Snakes came from less than ideal homelives and they sometimes suffered from terrible nightmares that could only be soothed away by a calm voice and hot chocolate laced with Calming Potion.

Snape would use the same spell upon Harry.

For the moment, though, Snape was concerned, no, alarmed by what Miss Granger had told him about Quirrell. Very little was known about the odd wizard. He was just one of many DADA instructors, and like those before him, more than likely wouldn't see another year in the position.

Quirinus Quirrell, from what Snape did know, had been a world traveler. He'd written one book, that Snape had borrowed from the library to read. It was called, *Living With Vampires: A Practical Guide to the Undead*.

There was no new information about vampires whatsoever to be found in the book. As a matter of fact, it appeared to be a collection of information that could be found anywhere wrapped in lurid prose that read like Bram Stoker's novel, Dracula.

Snape had been tempted to burn the missive, but, it unfortunately did not belong to him so he only returned it.

The Headmaster had told Snape and his staff that Quirrell was retiring from his travels and hoped to settle into the position of Defense Against the Dark Arts instructor. They had all seen the wizard's resume and had to agree that it was impressive looking. Quirrell had been a part of many archeological projects, from the wizarding side, and had quite a bit of experience in antiquated magic, which included the Dark Arts.

Snape never admitted it to anyone, but he had secretly been hoping for a rich conversation with the wizard, despite his vapid book, over the many things he'd learned during his years of travel and work on archeological digs. He'd been sharply disappointed. First, the man had a terrible stutter than made just normal conversation all but impossible, and second, he smelled horrid!

More than once, during staff meetings, Snape wanted to rip that ugly, purple turban off the man's head, and give it to a house elf to burn. Just being around the man made Snape itch. The turban reeked of garlic, but the man's body odour was nearly as foul.

Is it enough to cause a child to suffer headaches?

Snape doubted that.

Could it have been Quirrell that cast the curse that affected Harry's broom?

The man would have to be watched, of that Snape knew there was no question of. The question, though, was should he say something to the Headmaster? Snape sighed in resignation. He had no choice but to do so.

Rising from his desk, Snape adjusted his teaching robes and then left his office. He might be just in time to reach Dumbledore in his office before the man headed to the Great Hall for dinner.

Hermione walked up from the dungeons, across the Entrance Hall, and into the corridor that eventually led up to the Gryffindor Tower. It was a long walk and one she had begun to allow her body to memorise. As her body flawlessly walked the route, Hermione's thoughts were able to focus on Professor Quirrell.

Hermione held respect for all of her teachers, including the infinitely droning and boring Professor Binns who taught History of Magic. Respect, though, didn't exactly mean she liked all of her professors.

In DADA class, Professor Quirrell routinely ignored her. He didn't bother with snarky epithets towards her hand raising (which had toned down quite a bit, thank you), nor did he give points, praise, or even comment when she did answer a question.

However, Professor Quirrell did that to everyone.

More often than not, he lectured, and with his stutter it was generally a painful thing to endure. Practical lessons had been few and far between, and Hermione thought that when there was a practical, it was done in such a way that it always caused harm to someone. Afterwards, Professor Quirrell was apologising so much she was surprised he didn't fall prostrate upon the floor offering up his first born for his foolish transgressions.

It really made everyone just about ill.

His lectures made little sense, too, when she thought hard about it. They seemed more stream-of-consciousness rather than thought out, and planned discourse.

Then, there were those odd times when the professor would say nothing at all and would simply stare. Oftentimes at Harry. Professor Quirrell's stare never seemed menacing; more like he was studying an odd growth of fungus. That was when Harry's headaches would nearly turn into a migraine in class.

Harry was very good at ignoring his pain, but not that good at covering it. Both she and Draco knew Harry was experiencing



headaches because he would either squeeze his eyes shut tight, or rub incessantly at the scar on his head.

Several times Hermione and Draco had suggested Harry go to the Infirmary, which he would refuse. Hermione's argument had suggested that he ask for a potion for the headaches, but even the hope for relief wasn't enough for Harry to do anything about them.

Hermione hoped that by finally saying something to his Head of House, who seemed concerned about her friend, that Harry would finally get sorted out. She smiled to herself as she turned the corner.

"Time to pay the piper, Slytherin slut!"

A/N: That does not bode well for poor Hermione.

Another long chapter, my fine readers. I hope you enjoyed it. I have begun the next chapter which I hope to have ready in a week. Thank you all for your fine feedback because I am really enjoying this story, too. :)

Sunday, Oct. 13, 1991

Snape's intention was to go straight to the Great Hall but an odd scuffling noise followed by derisive laughter put his senses on alert. Neatly turning on his heel, he went into the corridor that led to the upper levels and the moving staircases. Up ahead, footsteps signaled the retreat of whomever had been laughing. Snape sped up his stride, not so much to catch those running away, but to discover what they were running from.

He almost tripped over her.

Hermione Granger lay at his feet. She was unconscious, bleeding from several wounds, and bruised in a number of places. One leg was awkwardly bent, and Snape didn't need a Diagnostic Spell to tell him it was broken. Even worse was the acrid stench of urine that assailed his nostrils. He cast a Scourgify Spell, focusing it upon the urine and wiping most of it away. It offended his senses, and that most definitely included his nose. Once it was gone, he knelt beside the child, and cast a Patronus.

The silvery-white doe gingerly lifted its feet, disturbed by the broken form of the young girl. Snape spoke to the doe, and sent it towards the Infirmary. It became a blur of ghostly silver before vanishing through the wall.

Snape began to cast various Diagnostic Spells so he could assess the damage. As he was provided the data via spidery runes that writ themselves in the air above Hermione, he began cataloging the various potions he would need.

"Oh my dear Merlin!" Minerva was suddenly upon her knees beside the fallen child's head, her robes and skirt of her under-dress pooling around her. "Severus! What happened?"

"It should be obvious!" he snapped angrily. Minerva only glanced at him, her hand to her lips for a moment. "Surely you don't..."

Snape looked up at the older witch and his gaze was hard as flint as he cut her off. "Now is not the time to defend your Lions, Minerva. Help me finish the diagnostic! Work on her legs," he ordered.

He went back to his work, continuing his diagnosis of the girl's head, neck, and spine. Minerva shifted and cast a Diagnostic Spell over Hermione's legs. After several minutes she asked, "I'd like to cast a Stabilising Spell on the broken leg, Severus. Is it safe to move her?"

He nodded but didn't allow Minerva to touch Hermione. Carefully he shifted the child's limbs so that her arms were straight down her side. He gently maneuvered the broken limb, glad that the girl was unconscious, or she'd be screaming with the pain. Once the limb was straight, and the bone set, Minerva cast the Stabilising Spell that would hold the break in place until it could be fixed. When that was done, Snape straightened the little girl's robes, offering her better modesty than she'd had when she had fallen.

By that time, Madame Pomfrey arrived with her black medical bag. Kneeling beside the two teachers, she assessed the situation quickly and then enlarged a stretcher from her bag and levitated the injured girl onto it. She then levitated the stretcher and the girl until they were floating in front of her.

For a brief moment her nose wrinkled, as did Minerva's as she stood. Madame Pomfrey scowled, "That isn't...?"

"It is," Snape ground out. "I vanished most of it, but her clothing received some of it."

"Find out who did this, Severus," grit out the medi-witch. He simply nodded and watched as the medi-witch took the girl away to the Infirmary.

Snape then whirled angrily upon the Head of Gryffindor House. "I do not wish to hear a word out of you, Minerva!"

"I didn't say anything!" she shot back, affronted by Snape's anger.

"You had better not," he warned. "I've no doubt that Miss Granger will be able to point out her attackers." He then reached into an inner pocket and held up a thin phial that held a yellowish fluid. "If not, trust me, I'll learn who it is." He spun sharply away, leaving the older witch to clean up the remaining mess on the flagstones.

Minerva slumped with her back against the corridor wall. Lowering her face into her hands, she began to weep silently.

Dumbledore had listened as the young man before him railed against Hermione's as of yet unknown attackers. He demanded expulsion and would not allow the Headmaster to speak. When it seemed he had worn himself out, Snape had flopped into a chair by the fireplace, Dumbledore rose from his desk.

The Headmaster touched Snape's shoulder, and was disturbed by the flinch as the younger man recoiled from his touch. Overlooking it, he moved to the opposite chair and seated himself.

"The Marauders were many things, Albus, but never did they ever... piss... on me!" Snape grit out in disgust.

"This attack will not go unpunished, my boy," Albus sighed.

"Whoever they are, Albus, they must be expelled." Snape eyed the older man. His throat was taut with anger, anger against the man seated in front of him that he could not release. Snape needed Dumbledore to act in favour of one student, not for the good of the many. If he didn't, it would destroy the last shard of affection Snape still held for the man. The trust, well, that was gone. After Snape had learned that the Headmaster had lied to him about his freedom, and that Dumbledore had somehow stolen the Potter estate, and Lily's estate, and still intended to send Harry back into an abusive situation for no good reason; no, there couldn't be trust after that.

If the attackers were Gryffindors, as Snape strongly suspected they were, would the Headmaster favor his old House over the welfare of the injured student? Snape could cite many times in which Dumbledore had taken the side of Gryffindor over Slytherin, and wasn't Miss Granger practically an honorable Snake? It was how he viewed her, especially after this attack.

"Expulsion, Albus," Snape repeated before the older wizard could possibly deny him.

"The instigator will be expelled, Severus," agreed Albus with deep regret. He felt as though he were betraying a young student's future. He also knew, though, that he had little choice. His Potions Master was only echoing the demands from outraged parents that he would receive once the Daily Prophet heard of this mess. He supposed he

ought to be thankful that Snape wasn't demanding the interference of Aurors.

There was silence between the two men before Snape quietly rose from his chair. His thoughts were terribly crowded feeling despite his Occlumency. He had put a lot in Lucius' hands in regards to Harry, but now he needed to do something on his own.

"I will not be teaching my classes tomorrow," Snape stated to his employer.

Albus nodded, his gaze upon the flames in the fireplace. "I can take them," he added.

Snape nodded curtly and left the Headmaster's office.

The Potions Master arrived fifteen minutes later in the Infirmary and was not at all surprised to find two of his Snakes beside Hermione's bed after curfew. He didn't chase Draco or Harry away, but Summoned a third chair and sat on the other side of the bed. He leaned forward, his elbows on his knees, tiredly.

"Sir?" Harry spoke softly. His fingers were threaded through the fingers of one of Hermione's hands. Draco sat at her head, curling his finger through one of the many spiral curls that made up her bushy hair.

"Yes, Harry?" Snape acknowledged the boy wearily.

"Will Hermione get re-Sorted now?" Harry asked worriedly.

He nodded. "She will." He didn't elaborate upon the possibility that the Malfoys might bring a suit against Minerva for holding up the petition for re-Sorting, or for the fact that she ignored the girl's plight.

Snape cradled his head in his hands. He was conflicted. He really didn't wish to see Minerva dismissed from Hogwarts. As a colleague, he had gained respect for the woman, but always they clashed when it came to guiding the children in their Houses.

The teaching staff at Hogwarts had always been more than teachers. Such was the way it should be, for a boarding school. They were mentors, confidants, the judge in conflicts, the soothers of hurt

feelings in addition to being advisors in regards to their students futures. Snape felt very strongly that it was his job as a teacher to know what his Snakes were about, and what they were capable of. He was the only teacher that met with the parents of his Snakes on a regular basis (in many cases this was for his own survival, as many parents of his Snakes had been sympathisers of Voldemort). He was the only Head of House that insisted upon enforcing an old rule of Hogwarts that called for physicals on all students at the beginning of each term. Although he was keeping an eye out for abuse, it also helped him to know if his Snakes were susceptible to any childhood diseases, or had health conditions he needed to be aware of.

Filius Flitwick and Pomona Sprout, both parents, and grandparents, were good Heads of Houses because they kept a close relationship with their students, as Snape did with his. They were of a gentler mien (Pomona invariably hugged everyone – and sometimes that included a very unyielding Head of Slytherin!). Of course it was Snape who was often accused of favouring his Snakes, but no one ever seemed to mention that Flitwick favoured his Ravens, and Sprout favoured her Badgers.

Unarguably, the two worst groups of students at Hogwarts were Slytherin and Gryffindor. Snape wouldn't deny this about his Snakes. He well knew that they could be a crafty, sneaky bunch, if one allowed it. He did not. He preferred to hone and polish the nobler attributes of his Snakes. Although, as a Slytherin, his Snakes didn't quite realise, at first, how clever their Head of House truly was.

Gryffindor had always been a wild and gregarious House from the moment Snape had come to Hogwarts, first as a student, then, as a teacher. They were, frankly, a House of heroes and any reasonable thinker knew that if you tried to lead a battle with 100 generals, you'd lose. Miserably. After the battle, the surviving generals would be arguing strategy for the next 1,000 years!

The students in Gryffindor were no less loyal to their own than any other House was. Unfortunately, such loyalty came at the price of pranks upon their own, passionate arguments and disagreements, and jealousy. Adventure was the watchword for Gryffindor, in Snape's opinion. They were always seeking some sort of mischief to get into, usually found it, and never seemed to mind that anyone who came 'along for the ride' got hurt. What really mattered in the

end were the boasting privileges, and there was plenty of that. Gryffindors were loud and sometimes Snape wondered if they even knew the meaning of the word 'quiet'. Especially in the Great Hall. If there was something to cheer about, or even to revile, you could count on Gryffindor House to make the most noise.

Snape also knew that being a Deputy Headmistress only added to Minerva's duties because he often volunteered to help her to sort out and complete paperwork needed when she became behind in those duties. Once too often she had complained that her age, and the three positions (teaching, Head of House, and Deputy Headmistress) were wearing her thin. She had spoken a few times to him of retiring, but she was also afraid of doing so due to the inherent loneliness that awaited her.

Once, about three years ago, Minerva had actually tried to retire as Deputy Headmistress, but Dumbledore wouldn't hear of it. After all, wasn't he almost thirty some odd years older than her and going quite strong? Renewed by a talk with Albus, and quite possibly sherbet lemons, Minerva's will to leave behind one of her duties was no longer spoken of.

Minerva, strict, yet kind of heart, had been neglecting her duty to her students for years. It still caused Snape's heart a deep ache that Minerva still did not believe that her two favourite students – James Potter and Sirius Black - had been bullies. Snape didn't put Remus Lupin or Peter Pettigrew into quite the same category, for neither had ever instigated anything against him. The two boys, though, were still culpable because they had watched and had never done anything to stop the abuse.

Time and time again, Snape had warned the older witch of the trouble brewing in her own House, and she had ignored it to the detriment of another student. Whatever he felt for the old woman, he could not allow this assault on an innocent child to be swept under the rug. Something he feared might happen, with the Headmaster's blessing.

Snape lifted his head to study Harry. The small boy was seated on the edge of Hermione's bed, holding her hand and watching every breath she took. He could read in the child's body language the compassion and sorrow he felt empathetically for his friend. It

amazed him that Harry had such a generous heart considering the wretches that were the relatives he'd been raised by.

And it was all on Harry's shoulders.

Saviour of the Wizarding World.

At least, that is what Dumbledore believed. As for the rest of the wizarding world? Well, they didn't know about the Prophecy. To them, Harry was a hero because he had survived the Killing Curse and, as far as the majority of the wizarding world went, he'd vanquished Voldemort. Politically, Minister Fudge would love to be in control of the Boy-Who-Lived because he would be the perfect poster boy for so many of the man's reforms and causes; a commercial asset, in other words. Snape allowed that at least Dumbledore had not permitted that to happen.

Snape believed that Harry was just a normal little boy who desperately wanted to be a normal little boy. Harry wanted to be cared for, to run and play and fly. He wished for someone he could share his accomplishments with, and someone who would be there for him when he was afraid.

The Potions Master never dreamt of having a family. At least, not after his only love, Lily, married another. There had also been his unwilling time as a Death Eater, then reluctant spy and teacher. He had become used to his solitary life, and after the death of Lily, and when the Dark Lord had been Vanquished, Snape could see no reason for changing his ways.

Oh yes, there had been the few times that he'd gone to tea at the Malfoys, only to discover that the invitation had been a thinly veiled attempt at matchmaking. Not always a failing of Narcissa's, but of Lucius's as well. For Lucius to be involved in such foolishness, Snape figured it was because of the old adage, 'misery loves company'.

Snape was always polite in such circumstances, but he remained adamant in regards to his bachelorhood. He had no need of children disrupting his peace and so he could live without the need of a wife.

Yet, Harry had changed that. Once Harry had been Sorted into his House, his expectations for the boy were to treat him as he did any



other of his Snakes. He had not counted on the fact that from the moment he had stolen Harry away from his disgusting relatives, and saw the child's curious drawings, that he was falling under a delicately woven spell.

Harry needed an adult in his life, and Merlin forbid Snape should ever say this aloud, but he wanted a child in his life. Not just any child. He wanted Harry.

The little boy's amazing capacity to love was both an enigma, and an odd comfort to Snape. That Harry even had this, despite rough treatment at the hands of his aunt and uncle, was unbelievable. Sometimes, Snape could watch Harry with his friends in the Great Hall and not see that deep down the boy still carried heavy wounds from the abuse he had endured.

His nightmares, for one. His dislike in being crowded by others, or touched by adults. Except for Snape. Snape knew that Harry allowed his touch to comfort him, to support him. He did not allow that same touch from other adults. Harry was very careful, too, as to whom he gave his trust.

Snape could count on one hand those he knew for certain Harry trusted. There was himself, Madame Pomfrey (although the boy clearly disliked being examined, just as any other child did), and Draco and Hermione. The Potions Master believed that, in short time, Lucius and Narcissa would be added to that list when the boy knew the couple better.

Tuesday, the potion for *Cruor mea cruor* would be finished. Snape had meant to speak leisurely to Harry about the adoption and what it would mean, but he had not done so earlier. The truth was that as much as he had advocated to Lucius that he had no qualms about adopting the boy, it did unnerve him. Imagining himself in the role of father, to anyone, much less Harry Potter the son of the man he honestly had no fondness for, brought out all his insecurities.

Could he be what Harry needed? Would his temper, already notoriously short, ever become an issue? Perhaps he ought never to have another drink? Did he drink too much? And all those questions led to the one he hated to acknowledge the most; what if he were just like Tobias, his own father?

Tobias Snape had been a great deal like Harry's aunt and uncle. To this day Snape still was unable to fathom why, if Tobias had hated magic so much, had he married Snape's mother?

As a young girl, Eileen Prince had been a particularly gifted young witch. Unusually creative with Potions she had been the first witch to complete her mastery by the age of 21. By 23 she had established her own business, a small shop, Eileen's Potions, in Diagon Alley. It was during one of her rare excursions to London, a day of indulgence, that she had met Tobias Snape.

Snape's father had been ten years older than Eileen and despite being a Muggle with a rather mundane job at a factory, he enjoyed reading. Of all places to meet a woman, he had literally run into Eileen Prince in the bookstore, knocking her onto her backside and sending the pile of books they'd both been carrying to the floor. This chance meeting led to their wedding, which also led to Eileen being severed from the Prince family line because they did not care for her non-magical choice of spouse. Eileen didn't care, though. She loved Tobias.

The Potions Master knew that at some time his parents had truly loved each other, but he could not claim to ever have had first hand knowledge of their affection for each other. Snape had come late in his parents marriage when his mother was just turned 40 and his father was 50. Snape did not know, until he was much older, that his mother had suffered three miscarriages in the spring of her marriage to Tobias. A time when husband and wife both looked forward to children. A time when Tobias was still sure in his work and had not stopped Eileen from working in her Potions shop.

Snape's birth came at an awkward time, a year after the factory that Tobias had worked at nearly all his life, had closed. Eileen had had to close her shop, thus ending their line of steady income due to the fact that she had contracted a sensitivity to many of her potion ingredients during her last pregnancy. Unwilling to threaten this fourth pregnancy and thus losing any chance of ever holding any child of her own in her arms, against her husband's stern advice, she chose her unborn child against a steady income.

It was also unfortunate, and something that Snape blamed himself for years afterwards, that when he was born, Eileen Snape never quite regained the robust strength she once had.

Although Tobias never found steady work again, and found himself in the position of nursing an ailing wife, and raising a son. Tobias had tried to foster a relationship early on with his son, but the pressures of no work, Eileen's constant illnesses, took their toll. Tobias found refuge in a bottle while young Severus found refuge from his father's anger, in his books.

Snape's more rational mind easily told him that he would never and could never be like Tobias, but a deeper, more fragile part of himself worried that since Tobias was his father, a part of himself, that there was all the chance in the world that he could not only be like Tobias, but much worse.

It was then that Snape had to remind himself of all the things he had done for his Snakes during his time as a teacher. He also forced himself to remind himself of those times, when at the feet of the Dark Lord, if he were unable to discreetly aid in the escape of an innocent Muggle child, that he was swift to administer a painless mercy to the unfortunate child.

Snape was certainly no sentimental or affectionate teacher. To be blunt, he was downright scary to almost all first years. Gradually, though, the student that once feared him eventually learned to respect him. Very few students ever left Hogwarts with an absolute hatred of him.

It unnerved him to think that had he not been the one to rescue the poorly battered Harry Potter, Snape would have allowed old pain, old hatreds, and woeful pre-conceived notions to have sharply skewed his dealings with the boy. Something he was just beginning to wonder if the Headmaster had been counting on.

He had to stop his mind from indulging in these thoughts. Snape was feeling unreasonably tired after today's events and he still needed to speak to Harry about what his future held for a family.

Clasping his hands together, the Potions Master carefully formulated his words. When he was ready, he spoke quietly, but firmly. "Harry, I know that you have concerns about where you will live once the term is ended, and I do have a solution that I hope you will find equitable." The child's slightly puzzled look had him amending his statement. "I have found a home for you."

Harry drew in his breath, in anticipation, and held it as his attention focused upon his teacher, his Dark Man.

Snape gave the boy a small smirk. "First, Harry, would you mind breathing? It wouldn't do to have you passing out over Miss Granger."

Harry let out the breath he was holding and laughed, a bit nervously. "Who wants me, sir?" he asked, a bit breathily.

"They better be good, sir!" Draco declared protectively.

Snape smiled at both boys. Taking his own deep breath, that he was tempted to hold, but didn't, he replied, "If you would not mind, Harry, I would like to offer you a home with me."

Harry tried to tell his beating heart to slow down and shut up, but when had it ever listened to him? Never. So, despite his noisy heart, Harry smiled, a bit uncertainly, at first, because maybe his hearing was playing games with him. Had he heard his professor offering him a home?

"Me? Live with you, sir?" Harry asked hesitantly.

Draco was nearly ready to bounce out his chair with glee. He had no trouble with his hearing. After a few seconds, in which their professor had answered Harry with a nod, and his friend was still frozen in place, Draco did leap up from his chair and jumped up and down.

"Professor Snape wants you, Harry!" he enthused with a grin on his face.

Harry was aware of his exuberant friend beside him, but he couldn't take his eyes off of the Dark Man's steady gaze. "You... do you want to adopt me?"

"I would like to, Harry," Snape said. His own heart was beating a staunch timpani in his chest prepared to announce to all who might be able to hear it, that he was nervous, perhaps even afraid that Harry might reject him.

Not once had Snape given thought, until now, that it might be possible that Harry didn't want to live with his Head of House. The boy might not wish for a parent who was a teacher and a strict disciplinarian. And very deep down was an old voice that hissed, 'James Potter's son would never want Sniveling Snape as a father!' That sounded a bit like Sirius Black, and inwardly Snape dropped a rock on that voice to shut it up.

"Would that be acceptable to you, Harry?" asked Snape cautiously.

Draco grabbed Harry's upper arm, and still smiling widely, hissed, "Say yes, Harry!"

Harry chuckled at his friend and pulled away. Draco could sometimes be a bit too excitable for Harry. Giving his friend a small smile, Harry then looked at his teacher and nodded. "I'd like that, sir. How...?"

"Well, you recall the potion you've been helping me with?" Harry nodded again. "That is the Cruor mea cruor Potion. That means Blood of my Blood. It is a type of adoption that isn't done anymore, since the Ministry prefers to file parchment instead of potions." Snape gave the Ministry a slight sneer before continuing. "As there have been a few complications, and questions, regarding your Magical Guardianship in the wizarding world, it was felt that this potion would allow us to step around those complications."

Whatever those complications were, Harry didn't really care. What little he had known as family, had signed him away without hesitation. Timidly he asked, "Will it make me your son?"

"The potion works on both a biological and magical level, Harry. For all intents and purposes, you would be more than just my adopted son, you would appear to be my biological son." Although Harry was listening intently, Snape doubted that Harry was understanding all of what he said. "Due to those complications I mentioned earlier, we are not going to be able to announce that I have adopted you. It better suits our purposes that you appear as my biological son. Which will mean that you will also be my biological heir."

Harry let go of Hermione's hand because he'd begun to grip her fingers too tightly. He moved off the bed and stood. He was trying to

make sense of all that his teacher was saying. Draco was about to interrupt, but a look from his Head of House effectively silenced him.

"Harry?" Snape asked cautiously.

In seconds Harry was firmly in his professor's embrace, his cheek pressed against the man's chest, where he could hear that the older man's heart beat as nervously as did Harry's.

"Please! Please! Yes, sir! I want to be yours!"

Breathing out a breath that he must have inadvertently been holding, Snape wrapped his arms around the child... his son.

A few minutes later, it was Draco, who now sat on the other side of Hermione's bed, opposite the soon-to-be father and son, who brought up the question of Harry's inheritance, thus proving that the boy truly was Lucius Malfoy's son.

"Harry still gets his Potter inheritance, right, sir?" asked Draco, his brow beetled in thought.

"Not right away," Snape replied. He did not elaborate that other than Harry's vault, and an Invisibility Cloak, there was no estate to inherit.

"What do you mean, sir?" asked Draco. Harry listened, but he was not concerned about any old money, his concern was more personal.

"You recall that I said there were complications?" Draco nodded and when Snape glanced sideways to look at Harry, he nodded too. "There are a number of people who would object to me adopting Harry. They have the power, in their selfishness, to break an adoption." Harry gripped the arms of his chair as he felt his heart plummet. His listening became more intense. "It was your father, Draco, who discovered one of the old methods of bringing an orphan into the folds of another family." Draco beamed proudly at this. His father was a very intelligent man! Glancing again towards Harry, he could see the worry and apprehension in the boy's expression.

Snape put out a hand to lay over one of Harry's white knuckled hands and he could feel the cool bloodlessness of it. Carefully he pried the fingers from the arm of the chair and enveloped those small fingers into his hand.

"As I said, the Cruor mea cruor creates both a biological and a magical bond between parent and child. If someone who is testing paternity does not know that Cruor mea cruor is involved, then there is no test, magical or otherwise, that can tell that the bond is not genuinely filial." Snape frowned at Harry's puzzlement. He sighed, "I see I need to get you a dictionary," he teased gently.

Harry smiled lightly, but it faded quickly. "Does it mean that my dad won't be my dad anymore?" he asked in worry.

This was one point in regards to the potion that made an explanation to a child awkward. The DNA of the original father would still be there, but the DNA of the living father would override that of the dead father. The tests, mostly potions, that currently existed to determine the paternity of a child, could only utilise the DNA of a living parent for comparison. If he and Harry were to drink the Cruor mea cruor, and then took a paternity test, there would only be Harry and Snape's DNA to test. The end result of the paternity test would only show that Snape was Harry's biological father. It would ignore the DNA of James Potter due to the fact that they simply did not have DNA directly from James to test.

Snape decided that the technical explanation really had no place in Harry's question, so he simply replied, "James Potter will always be your father."

That declaration eased the boy's mind considerably and he breathed a sigh of relief. Draco's brow was still furrowed with deep thought. For a moment Snape turned his attention to the pale, blonde haired boy. "What are you thinking of, Mr. Malfoy?"

"Well," he began slowly, still thinking as he spoke, "if everyone thinks that Harry is your son... his... I mean, what's going to happen to his vault at Gringotts?"

Snape glanced down at Harry and wondered at the boy's scowl. For the moment, he chose to ignore it as he explained, "Because we will not be able to disclose the adoption, Harry will be my sole heir and he will not have access to his vault."

"I don't care about that!" Harry suddenly and vehemently protested. To Snape's consternation, Harry grasped his forearm convulsively,

and captured the older man's dark gaze with his own viridian scrutiny. "It's really all right," Harry breathlessly spoke. "I don't need money. I just need you."

Snape covered the hand on his forearm with his other hand and spoke sincerely, "As your... father, Harry, it will be my responsibility to provide for your needs." He saw the beginning of a protest and stopped it before it began by interjecting, "You are underage, Mr. Potter, and it is not your place to 'earn your keep'." He leaned a bit closer, but spoke in a tone that Draco could still hear. "The goblins assure me that you will have access to your vault, and to your inheritance when we are able to disclose the adoption."

"But, it doesn't matter," Harry whispered weakly.

It was Draco who saved the entire conversation by grinning and exclaiming, "You're getting a family, Harry!"

That stirred up Harry's excitement and he jumped up from his chair to give the older man, a tight hug. "When do I get to call you 'dad'?"

Snape gave the small boy a squeeze. He then ran his fingers through the boy's hair in a futile attempt to straighten the mess. "The potion will be ready on tuesday. As the Malfoy's are coming to visit Hermione, I'd like them to be our witnesses. Is there anyone you would like to witness the ritual?"

"Draco!" Harry said instantly. He then looked down at his prostate friend who was still unconscious. "What about Hermione?"

Snape nodded, "If she is awake by then, which I believe she will be, we shall include her, as well."

After escorting his two Snakes back to their dorm Snape returned to the Infirmary. This time he found Minerva sitting beside the now sleeping Gryffindor girl. Before announcing his presences, he observed the older witch.

There was no sign of the hard-edged woman he knew. Minerva's age had never been more apparent than in the moment she sat beside Hermione, head bowed, shoulders drooping, and back bent in defeat. He also realised that Minerva was not dressed in one of her endless tartan plaids. Her robes were black with a dress of deep,



dark red beneath them. The sight of the missing plaids was a bit unnerving.

"Minerva?" he asked as he stepped closer to Hermione's bed.

Minerva lifted her head and he could see by her red rimmed eyes that she had been crying. Oh, he so didn't need this!

"Severus, if you wish to berate me for my negligent actions, I only ask that you not do so here. Miss Granger has only just now gone from an unconscious state into normal sleep and I do not wish her disturbed."

Snape nodded, and then motioned towards the corridor. Minerva stood and glided away from the girl's bed, moved past Snape, and out into the corridor where she was joined by the Potions Master who put up a Muffliato Spell to keep others from hearing.

"Do you know, yet, who hurt her?" asked Minerva quickly in an effort to stem the tide of the wizard's anger.

"No, I do not," he replied curtly. "That shouldn't matter to you right now, Minerva. A child, in your care, was assaulted in one of the worst ways possible and you are concerned about the perpetrators?"

Minerva stiffened. "I am concerned about Miss Granger, Severus! I want to know who hurt her so they can be dealt with!"

"And if they are from your own House?" he asked darkly.

"I thought it didn't matter," she snapped back at Snape.

Snape crossed his arms across his chest. He shouldn't be baiting the older witch, but he couldn't help himself. It angered him to know that an adult, who should have known better and protected the children in her care, hadn't. As much as he'd felt his heart tear at the sight of the older woman as she sat beside Miss Granger, he could not find it in himself to forgive her actions.

"Why did you not see what was happening, Minerva? Are you that blind to what is going on in your own House?"

That accusation stirred the witch and she looked up at the Potions Master with colour flushing her parchment cheeks. "I did see what was happening and I did my best to fix it!"

"You put the onus on Miss Granger's shoulders when the behavior of others wasn't her fault!" he suddenly shouted.

"She wasn't conforming!" Minerva shouted right back.

"Not conforming? Not conforming?" Snape's lip curled as his temper rose. "So

you want her to fall in like a good little lion, becoming like all the other

girls? You want her to force herself to change, losing that bright spark of

life? Her love of learning? Minerva, the girl used to drive me mad, but even I

recognize her potential to do great things, perhaps, with that brilliant mind,

even to change the world. And you would suppress that, just so she could make

her life easier?" He was seething and his dark eyes glittered with preternatural force. "She is special. She is different," he spat. "She is being bullied by her classmates, whether you choose to see it or not, because of that difference."

Snape scowled darkly at Minerva. "I... I will admit that Potter and Black

were... smart," he ground out. "But you turned a blind eye to them, and allowed

them to bully me. I tried to say something to you, but you didn't believe me and it only got worse. I was in and out of the hospital wing, and then once... once, Sirius Black nearly got me killed!" He turned away for a moment, breathing heavily as the past swam up, threatening to overwhelm him. Yet, he was not finished. Slowly turning, he continued, his voice deadly, yet soft, "Luckily, Potter saved my life." Minerva was stunned and found herself pressed up against the corridor wall. She started to protest, but Snape concluded by declaring, "You allow this. Every time. I will not see it happen to a girl like Miss Granger, a girl in YOUR. OWN. HOUSE."

\*\* His robes billowed behind him as he strode back into the Infirmary where he dropped into an empty chair.

Snape never heard Minerva leave the corridor.

Monday, Oct. 14, 1991

Hermione woke at the wee hour of four in the morning to the sound of someone gently snoring to her right. She moved her head and regretted it immediately as pain blossomed within her skull. She let out a strangled whimper.

There was a sharp sound of chair legs scraping against the floor as the snoring was cut off. A hand touched her shoulder, the warmth reassuring her.

"Do not move, child," a deep voice purred against her eardrums. Hermione sighed and resisted acknowledging the voice with a nod. "I will get you a pain potion."

The hand was gone with the sound of robes swishing gently across the floor. That's when Hermione realised her eyes were still closed. Very cautiously she opened one eye a crack and was glad to find that the light was dim. She opened the other one just as Professor Snape brought a phial to her that was slim at the top, round at the bottom. He seated himself beside her then slipped an arm under the top of her shoulders, supporting her neck and head as he tipped the phial to her lips.

"All of it now, Miss Granger," his voice was soft as brushed silk and Hermione was very glad he wasn't speaking above his normal volume.

The pain reliever was absolutely dreadful tasting, but Hermione did no more than grimace and close her eyes at the taste. She opened her eyes just as her teacher lowered her back against her pillows. She blinked as he Vanished the phial.

After a moment she asked, "Where does it go?" The pain reliever drifted like a cloud through her limbs and skull leaving behind a pleasantly gentle euphoria.

Snape returned to his chair and smirked at her question. "Are you under the impression that everything Vanished disappears into nothingness?" he asked, keeping his voice quiet.

Hermione sighed, happily. The pain reliever felt goooooood. "That wouldn't really make sense, sir. It's not psycho... physic... uhm... it would be against the Law of Physics, wouldn't it?"

"I forget, Miss Granger, that you have more intelligence than the average first year." He leaned back in the chair and stretched out his legs. "To Vanish something is merely to send it to another location. Banishing an object returns the item back to its atomic elements."

"When do we get to learn that magic?" she asked.

"Miss Granger," he said in a firm tone, "as much as I would like to indulge your desire for knowledge, I need to ask for knowledge from you." Hermione winced and drew her blankets up to her chin. "I know it is unpleasant to think of what happened, but we need to know. We also need to know who did this to you?"

Hermione wouldn't reply at first, but then she asked, very timidly, "What did they do to me?"

Snape began to count off the girl's injuries, "Your left leg was broken beneath the knee. You had multiple cuts on your arms and legs along with at least a dozen bruises. Your right eye is healing well from having been badly bruised, and you suffered a mild concussion."

Hermione sniffled and a tear dropped down to her pillow. Snape leaned forward, dabbed at the tear with his handkerchief, and then gave it to her. Hermione crushed the handkerchief in her hand and closed her eyes. "They did something else." More tears flowed from under the closed lids at that confession.

Snape pinched the bridge of his nose. He had hoped that the final humiliation had occurred after Hermione had lost consciousness. She was all too aware, it seemed, of precisely what her attackers had done to her.

When it appeared that Hermione had gotten herself somewhat under control, he leaned forward slightly and asked, "Miss... Hermione, can you tell me who did this to you?"

The handkerchief was crushed further as her other hand picked viciously at the binding of the blanket. Tears continued to flow and

Snape sighed in frustration. He moved himself back to the little girl's bed and took her hands in his. He caught her doe-eyed gaze with his and repeated his question.

"R-r-ron Weasley," she breathed, then hiccupped. "Dean Th-th-thomas and... and... Seamus." Her hands squeezed her teachers hands very tightly as she described how the three first years had ambushed her. Ron had knocked her down, but it was Seamus who hexed her and broke her leg with the Tarantellegra Hex. Dean had actually kicked her a few times, while Ron just kept throwing insults at her and laughing.

Snape swallowed audibly in distaste as he was reminded of little Putrid Peter Pettigrew who had the laugh of a hyena and nearly danced when James or Sirius would hex or jinx him.

"When... when D-d-d-dean opened h-h-h-h... I thought he w-w-was going to... to..." Hermione gulped and closed her eyes in shame. She then began to cry in earnest, great sobs that had Snape lifting her onto his lap and drawing his cloak around her while he held the distraught child against his chest. One hand gently patted her back.

Madame Pomfrey, who received an alert that her patient had left her bed, came through her office door, but stopped when she saw that the Potions Master had an armful of weeping child. Choosing not to interfere, she slipped back into her office before Snape saw her.

After several, very long minutes, Hermione's crying eased and her throat was hitching with the last of the tears. Snape continued to comfort the girl despite the fact that he wanted to behead three little first years and put their heads on pikes in the courtyard.

"Hermione," he said as he lifted her chin with one finger. Her face was a mess of swollen, red-rimmed eyes. Taking the crumpled handkerchief from her, he did what he could to clean her face. He then vanished the linen, and spoke quietly, even though they were the only ones in the Infirmary.

"I need you to clarify for me, child, did Mr. Weasley ever touch you?" Hermione shook her head emphatically. "Did he, at any time try to stop Mr. Thomas or Mr. Finnegan from what they were doing?"

First she shook her head, then nodded, then she whispered, "He was laughing, but... my leg... and he shouted at Seamus, but then he ran away when... when Dean..." her voice dropped becoming almost inaudible as she said, "...peed." Hermione hid her face against her teacher's chest and he let out a small huff of anger.

Snape left the Infirmary with Hermione asleep under the aid of a Dreamless Sleep Potion. His stride was swift and sure as he made his way to the Headmaster's tower. Upon reaching the gargoyles, he glared at them and they quickly moved aside, allowing the Potions Master access to the spiral staircase without requiring a password.

The door to Dumbledore's office swung open to admit him, and Snape was not terribly surprised to see the elder wizard in his purple and green dressing gown, at his desk, dealing with the ever-present paperwork that assailed his position at Hogwarts.

Not losing his stride, he went straight for the Headmaster's desk and thumped a slim phial filled with a silvery white, gaseous substance, in front of the man.

"Miss Granger's testimony," he stated flatly. Although Dumbledore bade him to seat himself, Snape remained standing and glared down at the older man. "Expel Finnegan and Thomas, and send Weasley home for six months."

"I must view the memory and speak to the boys first, Severus," the Headmaster said softly.

Snape's lips thinned, but he ignored what the Headmaster replied and said, "I then demand that Minerva McGonagall be suspended from her duties as Head of Gryffindor until her review before the board," Snape continued.

Dumbledore's jaw dropped. "You cannot make such a demand, my boy!" snapped the Headmaster in indignation.

Snape sneered, "Oh, but I can, sir. In fact, according to the Bylaws & Guidelines for Hogwarts Staff, it is my duty to report another colleague's neglect when her actions, or inaction, lead to the injury of another student. Madame Pomfrey is quite prepared to back up any statement I might make. In addition, it is entirely probable that the Malfoys will bring a suit against the school on behalf of Miss

Granger and her parents if those three are not suitably dealt with and Minerva is not properly taken to task."

He started to leave, but stopped when he was halfway across the office. Snape turned, giving his Headmaster a very slight, smug smile, "In case you are wondering, that pensieve memory is a copy that Madame Pomfrey assisted me with. She also has Miss Granger's pensieve memory of the actual incident, should you require it." Snape spun back and strode to the door. At the door of the office, without looking at Dumbledore, he intoned darkly, "Expel Finnegan and Thomas, and send Weasley home to his mother. She'll straighten out the little reprobate and put the fear of Hecate into him!"

Dumbledore's door, which was spelled against slamming, whammed forcefully against its jamb, jarring the old wizard from his stupefaction.

It was late morning and Snape was at Gringotts in the slightly cramped office of Griphook, the goblin that personally took care of Harry Potter's vault. The goblin was seated at his low desk as the long fingers of his right hand trailed down a long scroll of parchment. Looking up, he adjusted his spectacles, and then looked at another parchment to his left. Letting out a growl, he scratched at the few hairs on his head, and then Summoned, wandlessly and silently, a thick folder. He glared at Snape before opening the folder, and so the Potions Master, picking up the hint, turned his chair so he was facing away from the goblin.

After nearly fifteen minutes, Griphook grunted, "As I thought!" The goblin came round his desk and handed an official looking document to Snape who peered at it.

Although he read the heading quickly, Snape had to stare at it for a solid minute before blurting out, "Power of Attorney?"

"Flawlessly legal, Mr. Snape. Lily Potter and James Potter gave Power of Attorney to Mr. Dumbledore on July 31, 1980." The goblin seemed rather pleased by the perfection of the document.

"Would this give Dumbledore any legal rights towards their son, Harry Potter?" he asked, still a bit stunned that Dumbledore had managed to steal the Potter and Evans' estates legally.

"Only so far as it allowed him to place the boy with his relatives. Mr. Dumbledore has no other rights to Harry Potter." Griphook snatched at the parchment, eyed it critically, and then glared suspiciously at Snape. "The document shows that a temporary guardianship was enacted twelve days ago, October second." The goblin sneered at Snape, who merely smirked. "Confidential, so it appears."

"It is impossible to recover any of their estates," Snape mostly ground out to himself.

"The Potter properties were sold, confidentially, so I cannot provide you with the owner information." Griphook, taking the document and rolling it up, returned to his chair. He leaned upon his desk with his elbows as he regarded the wizard. "There was an auction that dealt with the possessions; tapestries, clothing, books, etcetera. I can give you the information on all non-confidential buyers at the auction, if you are interested?" He grinned, a rather disturbing expression on a goblin. "There will be a fee, of course."

"Of course," Snape echoed sarcastically. At Gringotts there was always a fee.

After paying five galleons for the information on the buyers and what they purchased, Snape paid an extra three galleons for a copy to be sent to Lucius. Snape, unfortunately, did not have the time to go running around the country tracking down Potter heirlooms. Lucius at least had others to do the work for him.

Draco and Harry skipped lunch and made their way to the Infirmary where they found their friend sitting up in bed eating soup. Madame Pomfrey saw the two Slytherins and called for a house elf to bring the two boys something to eat with their friend.

Harry rummaged in his bag and took out a sheaf of notes that he put beside Hermione. "Me and Draco both took a bunch of notes in Charms, Transfiguration, and History of Magic, so you wouldn't miss anything," explained Harry.

Hermione put down her spoon and thumbed through the notes. She smiled at the scratch outs, ink blotches, and the fact that the notes were in no particular sort of order.



"Thank you," she said softly.

"Are you all right?" asked Draco tentatively.

Hermione nodded as she fiddled with her spoon. Harry spoke up, "Everyone's always telling me it's good to talk..." his voice faded. "We're here for you, Hermione."

The little girl dropped the spoon and grasped the hands of her friends gratefully. "I promise, I will talk... sometime... but I can't think about it now. Okay?" She gazed into Draco's grey eyes and he nodded. Hermione then looked into Harry's green eyes and he nodded solemnly. She kept her gaze on him, "It does help to talk, Harry."

Harry blushed, knowing that Hermione was right. It was just hard talking to adults. With a simple look to his friend, he promised he would try harder.

It was just after lunch that same, eventful monday, when Narcissa, ever so resplendent in dusky rose satin and lavender lace, and with her glossy blonde hair dripping about her shoulders in rich, pale ringlets, swept majestically into the Infirmary and over to Hermione who was trying to sort out the notes the boys had left her. Within seconds, the girl was enveloped in a sincere embrace that also draped her in the exotic scent of rosa damascene.

The lovely woman seated herself on the side of the bed facing the girl. "I have sent an owl to your parents to let them know that Lucius and I are visiting to see how you are, Hermione. Are you feeling better?"

Hermione nodded shyly. "I am. Thank you for letting my parents know how I am. Madame Pomfrey says I'll get to leave by thursday."

Narcissa smiled softly, "Good. I'm glad to hear that, dear." Taking off her rose suede gloves, she folded them and tucked them into a small, beaded reticule. She then stretched out her hand and very lightly touched Hermione's cheek to examine the fading bruise beneath her right eye.

Hermione tried to keep her breathing steady as Narcissa proceeded to visually examine the nearly healed cuts and fading bruises. The

witch then took out her wand and with a silent spell she slipped the blanket aside to reveal Hermione's healing leg. Once her exam was complete, Narcissa removed her cloak, sent it towards the clothes tree by the door, and then returned her attention to Hermione.

"Where's Mr. Malfoy, ma'am?" asked Hermione.

"Would you call me Aunt Cissy, Hermione?" asked Narcissa.

"Aunt Cissy," Hermione said with a slight blush. Hermione couldn't help feeling like she was being enchanted by a faery queen everytime she was in the Malfoy matriarch's presence.

Narcissa gave the child an approving nod and then replied, "Lucius has a bit of business with the Headmaster, but he will be here directly after to come and see you." She picked up one sheet of the notes. "What are these?"

"Harry and Draco dropped those off at lunch. They took notes for me in the classes I missed," Hermione explained.

"How kind of them," Narcissa mused pleasantly. "They're good boys, aren't they?"

"They're my best friends," sighed Hermione fondly.

"As I am certain you are theirs." Narcissa then smiled brightly as she removed something from her reticule. When she enlarged it, it appeared to Hermione to be a very fancy catalogue. The witch held it out to her and she took it. "I spoke to my favourite designer, Elianne, and asked her to pick out a few gowns for you to look at for our Winter Ball."

Hermione opened the thin catalogue to see a series of models wearing different gowns that defied description. Each one was a different pastel colour of the rainbow. She gasped and ooh'ed over each one until she finally looked up and said with deep regret in her voice, "I don't think I can afford any of these, Aunt Cissy."

"Please don't let that concern you, my dear," soothed Narcissa. "I've always wanted to dress up a pretty little girl and you're giving me that gift."

Hermione's cheeks crimsoned and she caught one of her curls in her fingers. "You think I'm pretty?"

"Of course I do, Hermione! Don't you think that you are?" Narcissa was dismayed when the child shook her head. "Oh, my dear girl, you have so much potential. Especially with those eyes of yours." Narcissa touched the girl's chin and looked deeply into Hermione's brown eyes. "Those eyes will mesmerise so many young men as you grow up, Hermione." She then caught a curl in her slim fingers. "I'll teach you a few spells and charms to tame your hair so you will be able to do anything you wish with it."

"Like yours?" asked Hermione breathlessly. She then wondered at herself. She wasn't a girl to worry about clothes, and hair, and all that girly stuff.

Narcissa smiled secretively, "You won't be one of those vapid young girls that giggle over Witch Weekly, though, will you?"

Hermione shook her head. "I don't even have a subscription to it."

"Good. It's really a waste when you have a mind such as yours. It is one thing to dress up in pretty clothes to impress a young gentlemen, but if that is all that a young man desires of you, he's worthless. Any young gentleman that wishes to court you when you are older will appreciate your intelligence, Hermione, which is why Lucius and I will take great interest in your academic progress."

Narcissa gave her a stern look and Hermione nodded, happily. She always wanted to be pretty, but never at the cost of her mind. This was really the first time she'd been told she could have both!

While Narcissa and Hermione had a pleasant visit, the atmosphere in Dumbledore's office was slightly tense. In the Headmaster's office, Madame Pomfrey stood slightly in front of Lucius Malfoy as he occupied a chair near the fire while Dumbledore inexplicably chose to dote on his phoenix familiar, Fawkes. Lucius was reading through Madame Pomfrey's transcription of Hermione's injuries. He had already seen the child's own copy of her pensieve memory.

As he read, a narrow spot between his jaw and ear pulsed with repressed anger. It did not help that he had come out of Hermione's

memory with the desire to strangle the three hooligans that had hurt her.

A little too carefully, Lucius handed the transcript back to the medi-witch. He almost expected to see her vanish through the Floo, but it seemed she had the intention of staying. Her only move was to step, curiously, beside the Malfoy patriarch. Lucius was pleased to see that he apparently had the Hogwarts Infirmarian on his side. Inwardly, he smirked smugly. Outwardly, he gave the Headmaster his coldest patrician glare as he perched his hands upon the head of his snake-head cane. Anyone who truly knew Lucius Malfoy knew that he kept his wand within that cane. They would know that this gesture was not as relaxed as it appeared.

"Have you spoken to the perpetrators of this crime, yet, Headmaster?" asked Lucius flatly.

"I thought it best to speak to you first, Mr. Malfoy," the Headmaster gave his bird a handful of fireseed, and then turned to face the other wizard gracefully. There was a twinkle in the older wizard's baby blue eyes that disturbed Lucius.

Lucius sneered, "I would like to be here..."

Dumbledore held up a hand, and smiled rather beatifically. "I realise you would like to be in upon the discussion, but I would rather speak to the children myself." His smile dropped into that deprecating expression that meant he would happily pat you on the head and send you on your way, and not to worry about anything.

Lucius would not be dealt with in such an insulting manner and his eyes narrowed at the old man. "Children," his tongue drifted over the word like honey barbed with bee stings. "These are not children that did this, Headmaster. Miss Granger was threatened with retribution for her loss of points to Gryffindor, and they then lay in wait for her. As you can see by Madame Pomfrey's excellent report the child had her leg broken by the force of a Tarantellegra. They proceeded to hit her, kick her, and then," he very nearly spat out, "one of those... children... had the criminal audacity to urinate upon her!"

"Criminal?" sputtered Dumbledore. "The boy is only eleven!" he declared.

"Oh, is he?" Lucius smiled sarcastically. "Eleven you say? Well, then I suppose it was merely in jest, wasn't it, Dumbledore?" His voice hardened on the Headmaster's name. Very softly he spoke, continuing in that razor sharp tone, "Are you aware, sir, that in the Muggle world there are children as young as nine that have killed other children... deliberately... with weapons as dangerous as many of the spells taught here? The Tarantellegra Jinx is not a harmless, little, prank of a spell. If enough emotional force is put into the spell, it can cause broken bones, severed spines, and even broken necks!"

Almost as if on cue, Madame Pomfrey floated an article over to the Headmaster that came from St. Mungo's that detailed an assault by a wizard upon a witch who was his neighbor that had wakened him every morning at an unacceptable hour. The wizard, in his anger, jinxed the witch with a very forceful, hateful Tarantellegra. The gyrations her body was forced into from the spell severed her neck from her spine and killed her.

Albus' face whitened from the report and he nearly missed his desk chair as he went to drop his body into it. Slowly he placed the article upon his desk. Lucius was pleased to see, as the man glanced up, that the blasted twinkle was gone from his gaze.

"I'm certain that Mr. Finnegan had not meant..." began Dumbledore.

"You saw the same pensieved memory I did, Dumbledore!" snapped Lucius with righteous anger. "You saw Finnegan's face as he cast that jinx! It was his intent to harm Miss Granger!"

In a sweeping, graceful move, the young gentleman rose to his feet and strode over to the Headmaster. With all the intimidation at his disposal, he leaned over Dumbledore and declared, "You have an hour to summon those boys from their classes, Dumbledore. I will be here, on Miss Granger's behalf, as you interrogate them and mete out punishment." He leaned closer and hissed, "Appropriate punishment, or I will alert the Aurors."

With that, the Malfoy patriarch, and Hermione's champion, spun away from the Headmaster's desk and strode smartly to the door of the office. He stopped, and turned slightly, "And don't think that your Head of House Gryffindor will remain blameless in this, Dumbledore!"

For the second time, an angry visitor had bypassed Albus' charms to keep his office door from slamming shut. It slammed closed, rattling nearby glass shelves and their contents.

Albus slumped over his desk with his head in his hands. A voice near the fireplace spoke up and he realised that he'd forgotten that the medi-witch was still in his office.

"I'll be filing a copy of this report of Miss Granger's injuries with WCS, Headmaster."

Dumbledore's head shot up in shock. His face reflected the betrayal he felt. "Poppy! Surely you can understand that these boys only wished..."

She cut him off. Her voice was flat, emotionless. "As you will recall, Albus, I have never been negligent in my duties when it came to the welfare of the children of this school. It was you who swept certain incidents under the rug so the paperwork never went to where they should have gone and I will no longer put up with it."

"The boys will be dealt with, Poppy! I assure you," said the Headmaster in his most persuasive tone. "There is no need to involve the WCS. After all this was, truly..."

"Don't you dare call this a schoolboy prank, Albus," Madame Pomfrey thundered. The Headmaster visibly flinched at the woman's ire. "Do you really not know what abuse is, Albus? Are you seriously that naïve?" she asked in a much softer, and very puzzled voice. She waved her report at him. "This is abuse, Albus. What Harry's relatives did to him was abuse. What James and Sirius did to Severus was abuse." Wisely, the medi-witch stopped before her accusations encompassed the Headmaster.

"You'll have them expelled, Poppy," Albus sighed, almost, but not quite pleading. "They are only eleven. To be expelled would be a permanent mark that will affect their entire futures!"

For a long moment Madame Pomfrey was silent, contemplating the report in her hands. She let out a long, suffering sigh, finally. "Perhaps not WCS... yet, Headmaster." Dumbledore smiled and his eyes were about to twinkle with a bit of triumph, but Madame

Pomfrey continued, a bit more forcefully. "However, I cannot keep this from the Board of Governors, Albus. Not when the Grangers expect discipline for them, and for Minerva."

"What?" Albus rose abruptly from his desk, banging his hip against the corner. "Are you faulting Minerva in this as well? You and she have been friends for a very long time!" He was genuinely shocked.

"Yes, we have been," she sighed, hating to have to be doing what she would be doing. "I have spoken to Minerva before about members of her House, but she is stubborn and always felt she knew best." The end of that sentence was spoken softly, nearly regretfully, and to herself. Poppy then raised her voice, using the no-nonsense tone she used upon students that were causing a disturbance in her Infirmary. "Good gracious, Albus! Didn't you hear what Mr. Malfoy stated as he left?" she gasped in frustration. "Minerva is going to be brought before the Board! They've already got my report and they will have one from Severus, too!"

"He would not do that to a friend and colleague!" declared Albus.

Madame Pomfrey huffed in irritation. "And it's likely he won't, Albus. Not as long as you're here to threaten him with Azkaban!" She took a handful of Floo powder from the mantle, threw it into the flames and shouted, a bit too loudly, her destination. In seconds she was through the green flames, and gone from the Headmaster's office.

Seconds later the glass shelf holding delicate time pieces shattered into a million pieces as the Headmaster stomped up to his private quarters.

Left alone with his master's resultant anger, Fawkes trilled softly, mournfully, in the empty office.

Much later in the afternoon, as the sun was just beginning to slip quietly beneath the horizon, Narcissa and Lucius Malfoy sat in two comfortable chairs beside Hermione's bed as she slept, mostly from the effects of a Pain Relieving Potion and a Calming Potion. The couple were both silent, Narcissa, her hands busy with embroidery. It was something her mother had had a witch of Lady's Etiquette teach her daughters when they were in their teens. Of the three sisters, Narcissa was the only one who found the needlework task to be meditative, and creative. Every few minutes she would look up

from the coloured silk thread to look upon Lucius. In the last half hour the wizard had barely moved except to change his position in the chair as he continued to stare out of one of the tall, arched windows in one wall of the Infirmary.

Lucius' thoughts were stuck in an endless loop; reliving that afternoon in the Headmaster's office over and over again.

Lucius had given the Headmaster an hour to bring the three Gryffindor bullies to his office to hand out their punishments. Only minutes before the hour was up, Lucius thought that Dumbledore might just choose to ignore him and do things his own way.

The Malfoy patriarch knew that as powerful as his magic was, it was no match for that of Albus Dumbledore's magic. Hence, the younger wizard was smart enough to never challenge the old wizard in a duel. He'd lose, and there wouldn't be a thing left for his family to mop up!

Lucius' power lay in his knowledge of not just Wizarding Law, but he knew, intimately, every bylaw, guideline, and even helpful hints, that were the governing foundation of Hogwarts. He was also very well conversant in the Old Magic, the Elemental Magic that built Hogwarts down to each and every stone. Lastly, Lucius was very politically savvy, and had contacts nearly everywhere one could think, including many contacts in the Muggle world. Legally, politically, and perhaps historically, he was a much more powerful man than was Albus Dumbledore. It was, quite possibly, this knowledge that had the Headmaster kow-towing to the demands of the elder Malfoy, and just at a minute before the hour was up, a house elf came to fetch Lucius and take him to the Headmaster's office.

As Lucius strode into the Headmaster's office, he noticed that the large glass shelf filled with delicate time mechanisms was noticeably absent. Other than those few seconds of thought, Lucius gave no more attention to the décor in the office and turned his gaze to where Snape stood stiffly, equidistant between the Headmaster's desk and three boys with bowed heads. Madame Pomfrey was also in attendance, but she was out of the periphery of the boys standing by the Floo.

Dumbledore looked up as Lucius entered, but his trademark twinkling smile was quite absent. "Ah! Mr. Malfoy. Welcome." He



then turned to the three boys and actually glanced at them over his half-moon spectacles. "Gentlemen, this is Lucius Malfoy. He is here on behalf of Miss Granger and her parents."

Dean and Seamus kept their heads bowed, but Ronald Weasley's head shot up in shock, his gaze taking in the aristocrat who had taken the chair that Albus indicated at his side, to a more neutral area that was nearly opposite of the Slytherin Head of House. He glared in puzzlement at the man that many in the wizarding world had known to be entirely against the Muggle-born.

Lucius spoke, with a touch of boredom, to the youngest Weasley, "Miss Granger is my ward, on behalf of her parents, while she resides in the wizarding world until her majority." He then raised his silvery-grey gaze and lowered it upon the redhead, daring him to open his mouth and bury himself with outrageous accusations.

Wisely, Ronald kept his mouth shut, and tore his glare away from the wizard. Instead, he bowed his head again, until Dumbledore rose from his chair, walked around his desk, and then faced the three young Gryffindors.

"Gentlemen," Dumbledore began softly, deep regret in his voice. "I am disturbed by what happened recently with Miss Granger and have brought you here in an effort to understand why this happened."

Snape glowered sharply at his employer. Madame Pomfrey shifted on her feet. Lucius simply regarded his most recent manicure.

Of the three boys, it was Dean Thomas who spat viciously, "Who cares why it happened? She deserved it!"

Dumbledore's jaw dropped, and Snape was shocked by how well the old man kept his jaw from dropping to his chest. He then lowered his most dangerous scowl upon the stupid boy that had spoken.

Before Snape could back up his scowl with words that would melt the dunderhead where he stood, the Headmaster spoke sharply, "I am severely disappointed, Mr. Thomas." His blue eyes skated over all three. "In all of you. Miss Granger, just like others in your House, lost points. That was no reason to have attacked the child!"

Snape smirked as there, in the Headmaster's eyes, was the hard edge that had made the wizard a formidable dueling opponent. There were many that often forgot that although the old man was over 120 years of age, it had done little to slow him down. His reflexes were not at all dulled by his age, and there was still reason for most Death Eaters, and the Dark Lord (should he dare to return), to fear Albus Dumbledore. In Snape's opinion he did not see this side of the Headmaster enough. So, he nearly snorted with amusement when Seamus Finnegan was so foolish to follow Dean Thomas' inane uttering with his own.

"She weren't no Gryffindor!" snapped Seamus.

"Ah! I see then, Mr. Finnegan!" Snape's voice raked over the boy. "If a child isn't perceived as a Gryffindor, then your behavior is quite acceptable!"

The sarcasm in the Potions Master's voice visibly wilted the idiot between his compatriots. Ronald Weasley hissed under his breath, "Why don't you shut up?"

"On the contrary, Mr. Weasley, I'd be very interested in knowing what your friend's might have to say on their behalf," Dumbledore leaned forward, his nose practically against the young boy's nose.

Weasley's eyes widened in shock as he backed up and tripped over his own heels. No one in the office stooped to help him back to his feet, including the two boys that kept their eyes averted from their companion. When Ronald had regained his place next to Seamus, it was Lucius who finally had something to say.

Lucius rose to his feet and stepped between the Headmaster and the three boys. "I have been witness to atrocities none of you can even imagine," he began, almost conversationally as his silvery grey gaze overlooked the three boys.

All three knew that Lucius Malfoy had once been a Death Eater, but it was the youngest Weasley, who had lost two uncles to Death Eater assassination ordered by the Dark Lord, who was truly frightened by what the wizard was saying.

Lucius' settled his cold gaze upon Ronald Weasley for a long moment and the boy glared defiantly before finally swallowing

nervously. "I know the men you are thinking of, young Weasley, and they did not have what you have." For a second the redhead was puzzled as to what he might have that Death Eaters wouldn't. The ex-Death Eater gave him the answer, "You have remorse for what you did to Miss Granger."

Without realising it, Ronald nodded briefly. Lucius kept his eyes upon the boy for nearly a minute before giving him a curt nod and then turning his gaze upon the other two boys. Pointing with a slim, gloved finger at Seamus, he intoned, "I see, Mr. Finnegan, that you might actually think twice before committing such an act again." When the boy nodded swiftly, Lucius then gave his entire attention to the last boy, the one who had not only kicked Hermione, but had the audacity to further her pain by humiliating her most vilely. He could see, at once, that the boy had no remorse for what he'd done. In fact, he smirked rather smugly at the elder Malfoy.

Lucius smiled thinly, knowingly, almost as though he and the young boy were companions. He slipped a comradely arm over the boy's shoulders and drew him slightly away from the other two Gryffindors. "Now you, the Dark Lord would have greatly approved of you, Mr. Thomas." The boy's smug smile faltered and Lucius tightened his grip on the boy. He whispered into the boy's ear, "This was all your idea, wasn't it?" Malfoy's voice slid seductively over the boy and Dean shuddered at the tone that had so terrified many that had had the misfortune to be brought before the Dark Lord. "Tell me, Mr. Thomas, that jumped up little Mudblood was just asking for it, wasn't she?" Lucius laughed, and even Snape felt a little frisson of fear as he saw, in that moment, the Death Eater that had hidden so well amongst the insane and psychotic that made up the majority of the Dark Lord's followers.

Finally, Dean Thomas shook in revulsion and tried to pull away from the patrician wizard. Lucius only dug his fingers in deeper and more painfully into the boy's shoulder. "You... liked it... didn't you, Mr. Thomas?" Despite the boy desperately trying to pull away as his head shook back and forth negatively, Lucius drove the nail into his figurative coffin by saying, "Yes, the Dark Lord would have bathed in your cruelty."

At last, and greatly terrified of the man that had held him so imprisoned, Dean yanked himself away so firmly that he tumbled to the floor and once there, he scrambled away like a crab, only to

knock into Madame Pomfrey who yanked him to his feet by the collar of his robes.

"You're sick!" screamed Dean hysterically. The medi-witch still holding onto his collar, shook him. He pulled away. "You're the Death Eater! Not me! I just gave that know-it-all what she was askin' for! She didn't fit in, an' we didn't want her!" Dean pierced Seamus with a look. "Tell him, Seamus! You agreed with me!" Seamus' bowed head was now studying the hem of his shirt. Dean then focused his gaze on Ronald. "You laughed, Weasley! You called her a slut, and a bitch, and..."

"Shut up!" Ronald fired back. He left their little line-up to face Dean. "I told you, no hexes! Don't touch her! It was enough to just tease her and stuff but you...!"

The youngest Weasley boy was now enraged. Ronald tackled the boy and got one solid punch in, immediately splitting the Dean's lip badly. He was going for several more punches when Snape reached him and snatched him off the other boy by lifting him under his armpits. "You're the sick one!" The youngest Weasley struggled in Snape's grip. "Lemme go! It was him!" shouted Ronald. "Dean hexed her before! And he showed the girls..." he wriggled sharply, still in Snape's grip determined to reach Dean with his fists.

With a deft movement, Snape slung the wriggling boy so he was trapped beneath his hip and his arm. He then carted the boy away from Dean, who was being tended to now by Madame Pomfrey, and then firmly stood Ronald up in front of the Headmaster. Snape kept two hands on the boy's shoulders and used his body as a block so Ronald could not see Dean.

"This is your only chance to tell us the truth, Mr. Weasley," stated Snape pointedly. "Speak now and you just may prevent yourself from getting expelled!"

With wide, worried eyes, Ronald Weasley stared up at the Potions Master. When he finally scraped up enough nerve to speak, he kept his eyes upon his teacher. "I was mad at Hermione. She's such a know-it-all and kept lording her brain over everyone and for awhile she just wouldn't shut up about us studying and all that. Then, she started losing points and it was Fred and George who said we just oughta prank her for a bit, but then they wouldn't give us anymore of

their pranks and I didn't know any, but Dean did, but he said as we should get someone else to do the pranks, and since the girls in Hermione's dorm think she's ugly..." Snape sharply jerked the boy at that insult. "N-n-not me, sir! The girls do!"

"Fine," Snape ground out. "Keep going!"

"Well, Dean, he showed Parvati..."

"SHUT UP, WEASEL!" shouted Dean from the floor. Madame Pomfrey promptly cast a Silencing Spell. Dean was still railing against his cohort, but no one could hear him.

"Thank you, Poppy," smirked Snape. He then returned his darkest glare to the boy he still held in place. "You were saying about Miss Patil?" he prompted.

"Well, Parvati doesn't know the Bat Bogey Hex, and neither do me or Seamus. My little sister does, but she's not here..." realising that he was rambling, Ronald stopped and returned to his confession, "Dean taught Parvati the Bat Bogey Hex and he also taught Lavender the Acne Hex."

"Who made the potion that turned her hair into mine?" hissed Snape.

Ronald gulped. "That wasn't us!"

Seamus piped up feebly, "I'm pants at Potions!"

Dean apparently said the same, but no one could hear him.

"All three of you are abysmal at Potions and Mr. Longbottom, who manages to destroy something every session has more sense than you three do," sneered the Potions Master. "And though you may be blameless for that prank, you know who created it. So, tell me, Mr. Weasley."

For the next half hour, Ronald mournfully gave the names of everyone who had caused Hermione physical humiliation through pranks or potions. Nearly everyone in Gryffindor had a hand making the little girl's life in Gryffindor unpleasant. The adults learned that many of the Gryffindors had stopped, bored with the bullying, but

that Ronald kept up the taunting insults. Seamus and Ronald firmly declared that it was Dean who had coordinated the entire ambush.

In the end, Dean was expelled permanently from Hogwarts. Seamus was to be suspended for a year, and Ronald Weasley would be suspended for two months. Halfway through his confession, the Weasley matriarch had arrived for her delinquent son. Not bothering to say anything, she waited, like a stern and avenging statue, until her youngest son was released before taking him by his ear and marching with him, howling, out of the castle and down to the gates before Apparating away.

Lucius was taken away from that scene by a gentle touch upon his shoulder from his wife. "My dear," she spoke softly, "perhaps you might wish to re-organise the little league teams before Hermione wakes up for dinner."

Narcissa's husband let out a faint sigh of relief. Lucius grasped his wife's hand and lightly kissed her fingertips. He could always rely upon his love to ease away the darkness.

That evening, on this very long day, Draco ate dinner with his parents and Hermione in the Infirmary. Snape, having no wish to face any of his colleagues at the staff table in the Great Hall, invited Harry to dinner with him in his quarters.

Harry hung up his school robes on the clothes tree by the door and then dutifully checked his boots for any mud since he and Draco had taken to doing some more exploring down by the Standing Stones when each were called to dinner. Seeing that there was a bit of mud, he sat down on the floor and removed his boots. He then wrinkled his nose at his socks.

"Professor? Can I take off my socks? They stink!" yelled Harry.

Snape's head popped out from the small kitchen and he frowned. "It is unnecessary to yell, Mr. Potter. I can hear you quite clearly."

"Sorry, sir," he sighed and then wrinkled his nose, again, but towards his teacher.

"Remove them," ordered Snape. "I certainly don't wish for them to discolour my appetite!"

Harry giggled and took off his socks. He then went into the kitchen where he proceeded to the sink. He was about to wash his hands when Snape directed him out of the kitchen with a hand to his back. He pointed towards a short, shadowy hallway. "Down there, at the end, is the bathroom. Please wash your hands in there."

Harry obediently trotted into the shadowed hallway, his bare feet slapping against the stone floor.

"Wow!" Harry was impressed first by the size of Snape's bathroom.

It was open, tiled in black and white marble, and dark red cherry wood wainscoting. At the back wall of the bathroom was a slim, charmed window that revealed a now dusky sky that would be dark with sparkling stars, soon. To his right was a white porcelain tub with heavy brass claw feet. Overhead hung a shower curtain that had been pulled back to the rear of the tub. The water repellent spell treated, dark cherry red muslin cotton of the shower curtain was more of a heavy drape that pooled rather luxuriously at the end of the tub. The tub itself shone with gold fixtures.

To Harry's left was a wide counter of dark cherry wood that lined the wall and held two sinks that were deep bowls of black porcelain with gold faucets. Beside the sink nearest the door was a bar of green tea soap, a shaving brush, a pot of shaving soap and a straight razor, and then on the other side of that same sink was a smokey black glass and above it, held in a gold holder, was what Harry figured was Snape's toothbrush.

Harry smiled at the mundane items. Somehow, knowing that his teacher brushed his teeth and shaved like everyone else, tickled him.

Over each sink was an ornate mirror trimmed in gold, and neither was fortunately one of the many talking mirrors that littered the castle. Beside each sink was a narrow shelf that held washcloths and hand towels.

The last thing to be seen was the loo itself that was in a niche between the sink counter and the back wall. It was of white porcelain with a gold handle, but its lid was black porcelain.

Harry was just stunned by the luxury of the whole bathroom. It reminded him of some showcase room he might see in the women's magazines that his Aunt Petunia was always studying.

A hand upon his shoulder startled him and Harry instinctively ducked sharply away from it. "Oh! Hi, sir," Harry grinned sheepishly.

Snape did not acknowledge the flinch, feeling that in this instance it was best to ignore it. "Your feet are freezing, Mr. Potter," Snape's eyes glanced down at the still bare feet that were now standing on the tile floor of his bathroom. Snape shoved a pair of black, plushy slippers at him. "Hurry and wash your hands. The elves will be here soon with our dinner."

Snape spun away, choosing not to look at Harry's grateful and overly happy face at the gift of the slippers.

Minutes later, his feet now snug in the soft slippers, Harry emerged from the short hallway and back into the living room. A small, round table took up most of the room and was splendidly set with roast, small potatoes, steamed vegetables, a bowl of fruit medley, and a glass of wine for Snape, and for Harry a glass of cold milk.

For several minutes they ate in peace until Harry spoke up. "Are you sure you want me?"

The question was not at all expected by Snape, and he had to take a moment to wipe his lips with his linen napkin and then to regard the small child who was now drawing his fork through his steamed vegetables. Putting his elbows on either side of his plate, Snape steepled his fingers together.

"Have I given you reason to believe I don't want you?" he asked solemnly.

Harry drew a figure 8 in his vegetables with his fork. "Well, you keep calling me 'Mr. Potter' and I thought you were only going to do that for school, so maybe...?"

Snape smirked and resumed his eating. After a forkful of vegetables, he then replied, "It's habit, Harry. I am doing my best, when we are not in a situation as teacher and student to not only use your first



name, but those of your friends, as well. You must forgive me if I do forget sometimes."

"Sooo, if you're mad at me, or I'm in trouble, or something will you still call me Harry?" he took a small bite of vegetables and grimaced slightly. He wasn't all that fond of vegetables, but his teacher insisted that everyone in Slytherin had to eat them.

Snape smiled briefly. "I will endeavor to do so," he said with mock magnanimity. "However, if I do happen to call you Mr. Potter, and we are not in class or school, you had better come running. Post haste."

Harry giggled, "Yes, sir!" He ate another mouthful of vegetables before turning his attention back to his roast.

After dinner, Snape was seated on the sofa with his legs stretched out and his feet near the flames of the fire. Harry had talked him into removing his dragon hide boots and his black socks, and he now had on a pair of brushed satin slippers that were as warm as Harry's black plush slippers.

Harry had curled up against Snape's side and underneath a protective arm. Snape's hand rested upon the boy's thigh. Against his Dark Man, Harry had taken out all of the little pebbles he had found down at the Standing Stones that afternoon. One by one, they would both examine the pebble, and then Harry would try to identify it.

Harry picked up one that was slightly grey, shot through with dots of white and dull black. "Granite," he declared decisively. He put it on Snape's thigh and Snape levitated the pebble to a side table to join several others. Harry smiled as he picked up one pebble that had angular edges he was familiar with. "Pyrite! Will you come to the Malfoys Winter Ball, sir?"

Snape nodded, but then noticed Harry's attention was still on his lapful of stones. "I have my invitation and Madame Malkin is preparing a new set of dress robes for me."

"In sky blue, right?" teased Harry. He let out a giggling shriek as Snape's slim fingers tickled his side.

"Black, you idiot whelp!" Snape chuckled. He helped Harry gather the stones that had fallen from the boy's lap.

"How come you like black so much?" asked Harry as he fingered one of the cloth-covered buttons of Snape's now open long coat. Beneath was a plain, white muslin shirt.

Snape pulled Harry a bit closer against his side as he ran the fingers of his other hand contemplatively down the smooth silken wool blend that was the fabric of his long coat. "It's simple. Practical. I've never been quite the fashion plate that Lucius is."

"Mr. Malfoy is kind of pretty," Harry commented seriously. Snape bit back the snort that threatened at the boy's observation.

Snape coughed softly, and then replied, as though injured, "I suppose I am ugly, then, since I do not dress in all those lovely colours."

"No! I didn't mean that!" Harry stiffened, worried that he truly had offended his teacher.

Snape settled Harry back at his side and with his other hand he brushed at the boy's fringe. "Harry, I was only joking with you. You didn't hurt my feelings."

"Promise? Cause I know... I, uhm," he clamped his mouth shut.

Snape's eyes narrowed only a bit as he nodded, "Yes. I'm quite well aware of what the students call me, Harry."

"Doesn't that hurt your feelings, though?" Harry asked gently.

For a moment Snape was quiet, then he replied thoughtfully to Harry's concern, "In my first year as a teacher, it was hard to hear those hurtful names. I had a brief moment when I thought that perhaps I ought to be nicer in class, and I even tried it." He shook his head ruefully. "That was an unmitigated disaster."

"What happened?" asked Harry with interest. He laid his cheek against Snape's chest so he could listen to the man's heartbeat and hear his deep voice rumbling within his chest.

"I had a second year student; a Hufflepuff, that reminds me quite a bit of Mr. Longbottom. Elsie Handrew." He grimaced lightly at the remembrance of the child's name. "Miss Handrew, unlike Mr. Longbottom, did read her lessons in advance. Her failing came with a lack of confidence, a terrible questioning of herself for every move she would make. It made her nervous and somewhat clumsy." He smirked, recalling another student who was also clumsy, but always apologetic and very cheerful. Snape made a note to tell Harry a story about her, someday. He continued, "It was only three months into the term and we were to be brewing Arthritis Balm that day. Not terribly difficult, but one really couldn't afford to make a mistake."

"But Elsie did," stated Harry.

Snape glared gently down at the boy, "Who's telling this story, Mr. Potter?"

Harry shifted his head so it was still against his teacher's chest, but he could look up at him. He grinned. "I was just guessin'!"

"Hmph!" Snape tickled Harry's ribs lightly and as Harry let out an 'eep'. He then continued with his story. "I was trying to be nice. Which was difficult. I do so find shouting at dunderheads to be much easier." Harry giggled softly at Snape's side. "So, there I was, being as nice as I thought might be safe, but unfortunately it wasn't having quite the effect I was hoping for. Miss Handrew was her usual nervous self, and it seemed to be spreading to her classmates."

"You did yell, though, didn't you?" Harry surmised.

Snape smirked, "Mm, yes. I did. At the very worst moment, too. It began with Miss Handrew dropping too many green tea leaves into her cauldron. Then, one after another, in the most spectacular domino effect I've ever seen, one by one and within seconds of each other, the cauldrons launched themselves from the fires. Everyone was screaming and I was trying to herd the entire class out of the room and to make sure that no one was hit by either a flying or a falling cauldron!"

Harry's eyes brightened and he smiled at his teacher as he sat up and spread his arms wide, "But nobody got hurt and you saved the day and gave Miss Handrew detention and started shouting again!"

"Not quite, Mr. Potter!" scolded Snape as he caught the small boy around the middle and pulled him onto his lap. "I gave the entire class detention, was given detention myself by the Headmaster, and then...! Then I yelled at all my classes for the rest of the year!"

Harry started to giggle, but then he suddenly stopped, his eyes wide with disbelief. "Wait a minute! You got a detention? But you're a grown up!"

Snape glowered at the past for a moment, then grumped out, "That was my argument, but one thing I've learned about Albus Dumbledore is that he'll do whatever he wants."

At the frown Harry gave him, Snape thought that what he'd said about the Headmaster might not have been the wisest thing to say. Harry laced his fingers together and stared, hard, down at them. "I don't like him," he muttered.

Snape used his index finger to tilt the boy's head up so he could look into those green eyes of his. "The Headmaster?" Harry only nodded. "What worries you about him?" Snape asked very quietly, almost conspiratorially.

Harry whispered, "He gave me to the Dursleys, didn't he?" Harry began to nervously twist one of his teacher's coat buttons.

Snape was tempted to lie, but he could not do so, not to this boy, for on this subject Harry deserved the truth, even if it might hurt. "They were your only living relatives and he thought they would care for you."

"Did he ever check on me?" Harry didn't wait for an answer as he now twisted the button angrily. "I don't think he did cause it would have stopped if he did." Harry gasped as the button came loose. Black thread dangled wearily from one side of the button. Snape wrested the button from Harry's hand and quickly tucked it into the coat pocket. The thorough house elves in the laundry would find it and reattach it.

Snape wrapped a hand over Harry's and squeezed lightly. "Yes, child, the Headmaster should have checked on you, and he failed you by not doing so. Does it help that it was he that sent me to get you?"

Harry gave his teacher, the Dark Man, a terribly mournful look, "Why didn't he send you sooner?"

"I wish he had," Snape pulled the boy into an embrace and Harry wrapped his arms around the older man's neck.

Snape felt a touch of salty wetness on his neck and he began to pat Harry's back. The weeping didn't increase, though. Harry spoke in a whisper that was sad and grateful at the same time, "Mum did tell me to be patient though. She said you'd come for me."

It took every ounce of willpower that Snape had not to freeze and let his muscles stiffen. The drawing Harry had done and had taped to the inside of his cupboard at #4 Privet Drive rushed up to the very forefront of his mind. In that second he recalled the breezes that had touched his cheek when no breeze should have been where he was.

Was Lily watching over her son? Had Lily visited Harry in his dreams? Was it Lily who sent the child the images he had drawn?

Snape would have asked, but Harry had slipped into sleep very quickly. Securing his hold, the Potions Master rose from the sofa and then put Harry down upon it. He Summoned a pillow, that he slipped carefully under Harry's head, and then a blanket which he threw over the boy after he Transfigured Harry's clothing into a warm pair of fleece pyjamas. Snape then walked into his small kitchen.

Once in the kitchen, Snape wrote a quick note to Draco.

Mr. Draco Malfoy,

This note is to inform that Harry fell asleep in my quarters and shall spend the night here. He will meet you just outside of the Great Hall for breakfast in the morning.

S. Snape

Snape then called for an elf to deliver the note. After fixing some tea, he returned to his living room where he lowered the light and sat down in his favourite chair, near the sleeping child.

The wizard allowed himself a small smile of contentment. Tomorrow, Harry would be his son.

A/N: \*\*Snape's speech to Minerva must be credited to YamiNo Tomoyo who felt passionate enough for dear Snape that she had to write his response. Thanks again, m'dear!

Rosa damascene – an exotic perfume made from the oil of the Damask Rose.

If you don't think Ron got his just desserts, rest assured that besides what Molly will do to him, he hasn't seen the end of his punishment.

What do think about what's in Minerva's future? Do you think Dumbledore's feeling the noose tighten, yet? Should Snape be more vigilant? Were you worried about his button?

I'm getting silly since it's very, very late. Enjoy this chapter, my lovely readers. May you all dream of Severus Snape, and his wonderful voice!

Tuesday, Oct. 15, 1991

This should have been one of the happiest days of Snape's life, but it wasn't. Class after class, he only became angrier and his migraine only became worse. He hated taking potions when he had to teach, but with the noise of all the students speculating over the disappearances of the three Gryffindor first years, he was considering it. So far it had been sheer hell for the wizard.

What was worse, when his students weren't concentrating on learning, that's when they wasted ingredients and there were accidents. Only half of the day had passed by and one Slytherin, two Ravenclaws and one Hufflepuff had been sent to the Infirmary with minor burns. The Slytherin wound up with horns, too, and Snape was sure the potion they were supposed to brew couldn't do that. Who knew, though, what a child could turn a potion into when they were more interested in gossip than class?

At lunch time, Snape retreated to the cool interior of his office. He could neither face the Great Hall, nor could he face lunch. His stomach was too sensitive from the pounding of his head. He would have Summoned a Migraine Relief Potion, but for the moment, his desk seemed much more inviting and so he crossed his arms in front of himself on the desk, laid his forehead against his arms, and closed his eyes.

Snape did not hear the soft rustle of student robes, nor was he aware that anyone but himself was in his office. At least, not until an earthenware bottle was pushed against his hand.

Daring to raise his pounding head, he faced the concerned expression of Harry. He glowered since that was the only expression his face could handle. Draping his fingers over the plain shaped bottle, he uncorked it with his thumb. Scooting it to his head, which was still very close to his desk's surface, he sniffed the potion and recognised the acrid odour of a Migraine Relief Potion that he'd brewed. He swallowed a measure of the potion and was pleased by the warmth that blossomed outward, soothing away the pain in his head, and the tightness of muscles in his shoulders.

"You haven't had my class yet, today, Mr. Potter. How did you know about this headache?" asked Snape as he flexed the muscles in his

shoulders to encourage them to release the last of their tension. He had not lifted his head, yet.

"I just came in to see you, sir, and you had your head on the desk. Harry shrugged as he curled his fists into his sides. "I just guessed, but I figured you'd check the potion first like I've always seen you do, sir."

Snape smirked. The boy was getting to know him rather well. "Thank you, Mr. Potter."

"Better, sir?" asked Harry with a shy smile.

Snape noted that he could only see Harry's face from the nose up against the edge of the desk. He almost blurted, 'You're too small!' However, he caught his tongue from saying the damaging words and merely nodded carefully lifting his head and making certain it wouldn't spin off by itself.

"I thought you'd be visiting your friend right now," Snape used a quiet voice as he was reluctant to disturb the delicate equilibrium of his brain.

"I was hoping you might come with me. Mr. and Mrs. Malfoy are already there and Draco's gone to meet them," Harry explained. "D'you want to eat lunch with them?"

Feeling at least 90% better than he had been. Snape rose from his desk and ran his fingers half-heartedly through his hair. It had suffered from all the noxious fumes his students had managed, and so it wasn't looking its best. He decided he didn't really care. Walking round his desk to Harry, Snape put out his hand, and Harry smiled brightly as he slipped his hand into his teacher's. As they walked out together, Harry's mind cheered happily. This was going to be the best day ever!

Harry and Snape reached the Infirmary and although he only saw the Hufflepuff student he'd sent from the last class being treated for burns, the place seemed oddly crowded. At Hermione's bed.

Lucius and Narcissa were seated on the right side, and Draco was at the foot of the bed. On the left side of the bed was an odd looking



young woman, sporting dark purple hair, which Snape knew matched equally striking purple eyes.

"Nymphadora! What are you doing here?" demanded Snape with a slight scowl.

The girl spun... and spun herself right out of her chair. With a giggle, as her hair turned neon pink, she picked herself up and smiled at Snape.

"Wotcher, Professor!" she greeted.

Snape felt Harry step a bit closer to him.

"Speak the King's English!" snapped Snape to the young woman.

"Aww, you're still as charmingly stiff upper lippy as you always were, Professor." She grinned cheekily and then turned her gaze to the small boy that had what appeared to be a death grip on the Head of Slytherin's hand. "You're a sweet fellow. "I'm Tonks. Who are you?"

Harry slipped behind the drapes of Snape's robes, and peered out between his teacher's arm and his body at the odd girl. Snape put a hand between Harry's shoulder blades and nudged him gently in front of him.

"Nymphadora Tonks, this is Harry Potter," Snape introduced.

"Wotcher, Harry!" her purple hair faded into bright pink and Harry pushed back worriedly against Snape.

"Sit down, Dora," Narcissa ordered quietly. "You're a bit much for some people to take all at once."

Suddenly demure, and quiet, Tonks seated herself back in the chair, then shrugged apologetically. "Sorry, Aunt Cissy."

"May I ask what is going on?" asked Snape as he Summoned two chairs for himself and Harry. They seated themselves close to Draco.

Lucius replied, "Hermione is Dora's first field assignment for Auror Training, Severus. She's come to take Hermione's statement and we are here for moral support."

"Tonks," ground out the young Auror. "I asked you to call me Tonks."

Lucius' eyes narrowed at the young woman. "I shall call you Dora or Nymphadora, young lady. If you wish your friends to address you by your last name, then that is your prerogative. However, with family, you will just have to endure your name."

Tonks huffed, but mostly to herself. Narcissa eyed the young woman and straightened her spine. Tonks, seeing the gesture, sat up a bit straighter and received a smile from Lucius' wife. "Your name is one you'll treasure someday, Nymphadora," said Narcissa quietly coercive.

Tonks then slumped, her arms against her chest. "Nymphadora's too long and I don't like Dora!"

Snape ordered caustically, "Stop behaving like a child, Nymphadora! If you are here in the capacity of your job, then sit up and act like it."

Tonks glared at Snape, but she did end the slouching and took out her wand as she pointed it at Hermione. "Sorry for that, Hermione. I just need to finish doing a Diagnostic Spell and then we'll be done."

Hermione had been silent through the whole, odd exchange and just simply nodded. The spell was cast and they all watched as runes appeared above Hermione. When they faded, Tonks held a parchment transcript of the spell's results. She gave it a quick glance then rolled it up and tucked into an inner pocket of her long, leather duster.

"You were perfect, Hermione!" Tonks patted the girl's hand that rested on her blanket. "Thanks so much for putting up with me."

"Sure, Tonks. I'm glad I could do something helpful." Her glance drifted to Narcissa who smiled approvingly at her.

Tonks stood and then went over to Lucius and Narcissa. She kissed their cheeks. "Thanks, Uncle Luc, thanks, Aunt Cissy. I really needed this." She patted her hidden pocket and then stepped past Draco and ruffled his hair.

"Hey!" he grouched and she bent and kissed his cheek.

"Be good, cousin!" Tonks smirked as Draco glared at her.

The young lady then stepped past Harry and gave him a little wave. She stopped in front of Snape who did his best not to look at her. She bent to kiss the end of his nose and intended to dash gracefully aside and out the infirmary, but she tripped, spectacularly, across Snape's lap, and to the floor.

"Merlin's teeth!" Snape cursed as he stood and helped Tonks to her feet by almost dislocating her arm from her shoulder. "You're a bloody hazard, Nymphadora!" he hissed.

Tonks only smiled charmingly at him as her hair faded to a lovely blue-black colour. "But, you love me anyway, Professor!" Now she was able to dash away and she made it out of the Infirmary without any further incident.

He glared at Lucius. "Your niece is a menace to polite society," he declared.

Lucius chuckled softly, "But Dora means well, Severus."

Snape scowled and sat back down. "What was this all about, Lucius. Did you decide to call the Aurors after all?"

"Not quite," he replied seriously. "The Grangers requested an official report on the incident. Since we're not, yet, prepared to involve the Aurors in this, I contacted Alastor Moody and he suggested having Dora take down Hermione's testimony and mine of the meeting in the Headmaster's office as a way to give her a bit of field experience." Lucius then smirked wickedly, "Her annoying you was just a bonus!"

Snape glowered. "You know what they say when a gentleman is rude to a lady, don't you Severus?" teased Narcissa.

Snape glared at the presumptuous woman. "He dislikes her futile attempts at flirting," he stated flatly. "Aren't we here for lunch?" he demanded.

Harry, one of three children not quite understanding the adult conversation, piped up, "I'm hungry!"

"Me too," agreed Draco.

They were just finishing lunch and preparing to wrap up their visit so Hermione could get some rest when an unwelcome visitor arrived.

"Ah, Severus! There you are!" the Headmaster had paused a moment at the arched doorway of the Infirmary. He then glided in, nodding politely to Narcissa and Lucius. He then gave his attention to Hermione. "And how are you doing today, Miss Granger?"

"Okay," she said without a smile. Snape smirked in approval. The girl had been aware that she had not been worth a visit by the Headmaster when first she was injured.

Hermione's inquiries to Madame Pomfrey had been hardly subtle, but it had spoken volumes to Snape when he had learned what Miss Granger had been asking; the girl had wanted to know if the Headmaster was as concerned for her as her friends and teachers had been. Even Minerva, who knew that her career at Hogwarts hinged on this incident, had come to visit Hermione, once. Hermione had appreciated the visit, but understandably, she did not wish to be burdened by the woman whose regrets had come too late. But for this day, the Headmaster had not once visited. Not even when Hermione was unconscious, or then asleep.

Dumbledore ignored the soft rebuff, glanced towards Harry, and then settled his gaze on Snape. "I've been looking for you, my boy. Might we meet after your last class?"

Snape nodded. "Will six o'clock suit you, sir?"

Dumbledore smiled pleasantly, "I'll have tea ready, Severus."

As the Headmaster left the Infirmary, Snape pursed his lips. Lucius observed, "Dumbledore appears to be a man preparing to interfere."

Snape nodded, but remained quiet. Harry looked worriedly to his teacher, "Is something wrong, sir?"

"You have nothing to worry about, Harry," assured Snape. He gave the boy one of his crooked smiles, one that lifted just a small corner of his mouth.

Lucius had risen and he whispered in Snape's ear. "You said the Cruor mea cruor is ready, Severus?" Snape nodded, almost imperceptibly. "Then we should perform the adoption now."

Snape ushered Harry, Draco, and Narcissa into his private lab where he had the Cruor mea cruor potion waiting under a stasis spell. Lucius, holding Hermione in his arms, came through the private lab's Floo several minutes later. Snape quickly sealed the Floo against all other visitors. He then strengthened the wards around the lab. It would be disastrous should the Headmaster make an unscheduled visit.

Lucius settled Hermione upon a lounge that he conjured that would allow her to keep her injured leg straight and she could sit upright comfortably. Narcissa conjured a soft, thick afghan of mohair and draped it over Hermione's lap, knees, and feet. She then seated herself beside the girl on the lounge.

Lucius and Severus were going over the parchment that had a copy of the ritual. Lucius was shaking his head, "We really can't afford to cut any of this, Severus. We can't risk any disruptions in the magic, or Dumbledore might find a way to exploit them."

Snape's lips thinned. "My class of third years are not going to allow me to ignore my lateness." He then grinned tightly. "But what does it matter when I am gaining a son?"

Lucius smiled back. "That's what I wanted to hear, my friend. Get yourself and Harry ready while I mark the circle."

Snape glanced up as he walked away from the work table where the potion was waiting. "Harry? Come with me, son!"

Harry looked up and at his soon-to-be-father's words, he trotted away from Draco's side and to Snape. "Yes, sir?" Harry looked up expectantly.

Snape placed a hand gently upon Harry's right shoulder. "I was hoping this would not be hurried..." he paused. "There is a point in

the ceremony called the Words of Commitment. You'll need to think of something to say."

"We have to say something?" Harry asked worriedly. He didn't think he'd be able to make up something on such short notice.

Snape gave the boy one of his rare, full smiles. He touched Harry's chest. "Just speak from your heart and you will be fine."

Harry drew in a shuddery breath. "Okay." He glanced over towards Lucius who was using his wand to inscribe something upon the stone floor. Harry suddenly caught his teacher's sleeve and whispered, "Is this gonna hurt?"

"Seven drops of your blood is needed for the potion," Snape explained. "To get those drops, they will come from your palm. A ceremonial knife is used. It will sting, but only for a moment. The same will be done to me." Snape watched with concern as the small boy paled, but only for a moment. Drawing in a deep breath, he squared his shoulders and smiled up at his teacher. "Ready?" Snape asked, pleased at the boy's show of bravery.

"Yes, sir," Harry nodded.

Snape led Harry over to the circle that Lucius had inscribed upon the stone floor. He was now working on inscribing runes on the inside of the circle, where symbols for the four elements were on the outside of the circle, equidistant from each other.

"What do those mean?" asked Harry.

Lucius was unable to answer, so Draco replied, "Those four symbols are the four elements – earth, fire, air, and water. Father's inscribing the runes, but they may mean something specific to the ritual."

Lucius finished the last rune and straightened. He smiled at his son. Pointing with his wand, he went through each rune, explaining its meaning as it related to the adoption. "We start with Mannaz." Lucius looked to Snape who moved to stand in front of the rune. "That is father, the creator of hearth and home." Harry smiled at that. Lucius then pointed to a rune to the right of where Snape stood. "This is Othila, the soul of all that is 'home' to family." He then

pointed to the left. "Raido is the journey a family takes. Its up and downs, yet together they always shall be."

Harry interrupted as he noticed there was an odd break in the circular pattern. "Isn't there supposed to be a rune here, Mr. Malfoy?"

"I don't need to inscribe that one, Harry. You wear it," Lucius replied as though everyone knew what he meant. He glanced around at all the puzzled expressions, but noted those of Snape's and Harry's most. He motioned Harry over to him. Harry stepped towards the tall wizard and Lucius brushed aside his fringe that normally hid the lightning bolt scar. As he brought his finger close to trace it, Harry flinched slightly. Lucius withdrew his hand, and then glanced over to Snape. "Do you really not know this, Severus?"

Snape crossed his arms over his chest. "You appear to be in possession of knowledge we have not, Lucius. Explain, please." He scowled, showing that he'd tolerate his friend's delay only for so long if it didn't make sense.

Lucius looked down at Harry and raised his hand again so the boy could see it. "If I may, Harry?" The child glanced warily at Lucius' hand, but nodded his acquiescence. Lucius very gently moved his index finger closer and then very lightly traced the scar. "This is Sowelu, the sun. It also symbolises the Mother Protector, her love." Lucius moved his hand away from Harry. He kept his silvery gaze upon the boy. "It's been rumoured that your mother was able to keep you alive, and safe from the Dark Lord's powers through her deep and abiding love for you. I have no doubt that it was Lily's magic that left this symbol upon your forehead."

Harry raised his fingers and touched his scar with new curiosity, but a lingering sense of puzzlement. "But, it hurts sometimes," he said softly.

"It bled in Quirrell's class," piped up Draco.

"Harry always touches it when it gives him headaches," added Hermione.

Harry coloured at the reminders of what he viewed as weaknesses.

Lucius nodded sagely. "I would expect it to hurt when you are near magic or someone that intends you harm. It is a warning."

"So, it's not evil?" Harry asked hopefully.

"They say I'm still evil, even though I love my family, and do what I can to restore the honor of my family. Harry, has your scar ever hurt when I am near? Or Severus?"

Harry glanced sharply over his shoulder at the Dark Man. He shook his head strongly. "No! It's never hurt and I know you're both good!"

Lucius nudged Harry to stand across from Snape within the circle. "Sowelu," he said softly. "To your right is Othila, but as you see it is reversed. It reflects your desire, Harry, to have a home and family. To your left is Gebo, the rune of joining, of child to parent, of magic to magic." Lucius then left Harry's side and stepped to the center of the circle where the potion, held in a large, silver goblet, hovered in the air.

Snape, who had been staring, worriedly, at Harry's scar, interrupted, "Lucius, is this wise? That is a curse scar."

Lucius glared exasperatedly, "Obviously your lessons in Ancient Runes didn't take very well, my friend," he countered acerbically. Harry's hand went subconsciously to his scar, touching it delicately.

"This could invalidate the ritual!" Snape fumed.

"Severus!" Lucius shouted and then lowered the timbre of his voice. "My friend, if ever you've trusted in me, then I ask you to do so now." He turned slightly, and pointed an elegant finger at Harry. "That is no curse scar. It is the Mark of a Mother's Love." He returned to Harry's side and smiled down at him. "Will you trust me, Harry?"

Again Harry touched the scar. He thought about all the times when he had stared at it in a shard of mirror he'd kept with all his other treasures in his cupboard at Privet Drive. The scar had long been an annoying reminder of the 'car accident' his relatives told him that his parents were killed in. Later, it was a reminder of their truly horrible deaths at the hands of Voldemort. Despite all of that Harry had never hated the scar. He'd never had bad feelings for it.



Harry then nodded hopefully. He didn't want his scar to be a curse and if it was accepted during the adoption ritual, then that would mean it wasn't. "Yes," he echoed softly.

"Good boy. Are you ready, Draco?" asked Lucius.

"I am father," he replied solemnly.

Harry glanced at Draco, curious as to what he was going to be doing. Lucius began to speak before he could ask, so he remained silent.

Lucius held up what appeared to Harry to be a short dagger. The knife was an athame, used in many of the blood magic rituals that had been banned by the Ministry. It was an antique, an heirloom that had been in the Prince family for several centuries. When Snape first decided on using the *Cruor mea cruor* for the adoption of Harry, he had made a quick trip to Gringotts to find the athame.

Summoning the goblet to follow him, Lucius went over to Snape. He then held the athame over the man's right palm and spoke, "I ask for the blessings of Earth." Draco was near the symbol of earth and he sprinkled what could only be dirt on the symbol. "I ask for the blessings of air." Draco had already moved to the symbol of air and he quickly knelt down and blew gently across it. "I ask for the blessings of water." Draco had risen and had to trot over to the third symbol for water. Holding out a small pitcher he allowed a few drops of water to fall upon the symbol. "I ask for the blessings of fire." Narcissa took care of the last symbol by casting a very controlled 'Incendio' that allowed a tiny flame to fall upon the symbol.

With the last element 'awakened', pale threads of blue, white, gold, and brown drifted up from the symbols weaving themselves over the circle and its inhabitants. Harry and Hermione both let out soft whispers of awe. As Harry was so distracted by the magic overhead, he did not see Lucius use the athame to wound Snape's palm so that he could collect seven drops of blood. Before he knew it, Lucius was in front of him, taking his right hand in his. Harry gulped and tried his best not to yank his hand from the older wizard.

Lucius was slightly bent over Harry and gave him an encouraging smile. He then called for the blessings of the elements, again, and Draco and Narcissa awakened the elements a second time. New

threads joined, weaving themselves together and then weaving with the old ones.

"Ouch!" Harry cried out. He'd been distracted again and Lucius had used that distraction to make the cut on Harry's small palm with the athame. The child's reflexes tried to yank his hand back, but Lucius held the hand firmly.

"Shhh, Harry. It only stings for a bit," assured Lucius. "Can you breathe for me?"

Harry's green eyes locked upon the silvery-grey ones, and he nodded his head tightly. He began to breathe, as evenly as he could, never noticing that Lucius had collected his blood.

"Very good, Harry," Lucius said softly. "Now, close your hand, and walk to the center."

Harry did so and was followed by Lucius who met both Harry and Snape at the circle's center. Lucius then held the goblet up high above his head towards the nexus where all the threads of the elements were.

"I call upon the elements, the old magic, to bless these two souls and to bring them together in family," intoned Lucius. The threads moved sinuously down and into the goblet causing the potion to exude a fragrant, colourful vapor.

Snape reached out his right hand and quickly took Harry's right hand in his. Harry let out a gasp as he felt a surge of what he thought must be magic radiating outward from the cuts made to his and the Dark Man's palms. It was icy at first, but then warmed and made him feel a bit giddy. He smiled up at Snape. Harry figured that his teacher must be feeling the same thing because his smile was warm, sparkly, and a bit silly. He saw it for a few brief seconds, though. The smile faded, but remained in Snape's dark eyes.

All were startled, though, as a vaporous mist appeared between Harry and Snape. A second mist, not as strong as the first appeared on their other sides between them. Vague faces formed in the mist just as two very indistinct hands hovered over Snape and Harry's clasped hands.

"Mum? Dad?" Harry whispered in shock. Instinctively, his hand holding Snape's tightened.

Snape said nothing although at the sight of Lily his heart had skipped a few beats before leaping up into his throat.

Lucius hovered the potion that was still absorbing the threads of the elements. He quickly touched each of their shoulders and spoke softly. "It's all right. I read that this sometimes happens."

Snape shot the aristocrat a quick scowl for not having mentioned this possibility. Lucius smirked smugly confirming for the Potions Master that he had been aware of this likelihood. Harry was still mesmerised by the ghostly presences of Lily and James.

When the threads of the elements were absorbed by the potion, Lucius brought it down between the two wizards, and spoke softly, "Severus, drink this and accept Harry Potter as your son, by right of the old magic, the elements, your love..." he glanced at Lily and James who both smiled and nodded. "...and with the blessings of Lily and James."

Snape took the goblet with his left hand, gave a simple nod of thanks to the ghosts, then raised it to his lips. He then drank a full measure, and still holding the cup he looked into Harry's eyes and said, "Harry, today I make you my son. I promise to always love you, to keep you safe, to comfort you when you wish it. In honor of your mother, and also of your father, I make this pledge to you, my child."

Harry saw a glistening tell in Snape's eyes that made his own eyes feel rather watery. He almost missed Lucius addressing him. "Harry, drink this and accept Severus Tobias Snape as your father, by right of the old magic, the elements, your love, and with the blessings of your parents, James and Lily."

Lucius handed Harry the goblet and steadied it to make sure the boy had a good hold of it. Harry then raised the goblet to his lips and drank. He smelled the fragrant aroma of sage, and vetiver, and oak. The potion tasted like... home. When he finished a swallow, he had to blink a few times before he raised his eyes to the Dark Man's welcoming gaze. "I..." he faltered, and blinked again, feeling an insistent joy prickling against his eyelids. Whispering, almost shyly, he began again, "Dad..." he then glanced shyly at James who gave

him an encouraging nod. Harry smiled and then looked up at his new father. "Dad, thank you for coming for me and taking me away from the Dursleys. Thank you for caring for me and making my nightmares less scary." He then glanced quickly at the shades of his parents. "Mum, dad, I promise to be the best son ever to... to my new dad and to make you proud so you don't have to worry about me." James grinned and chuckled silently while Lily's smile radiated her love for her son. Feeling giddy, but serious, Harry returned his gaze to Snape. "Dad, I promise that I'll... try to behave, and do my homework, and study, and I'll make a lot of good grades so you can be proud of me." He started to hand the goblet back to Lucius, but remembered he'd forgotten something. "Oh yeah! I pledge this to you, dad, because... uhm... because my parents are happy and you get to be my dad forever, now!"

There was a small bit of laughter and smiles, but the ritual hadn't quite ended. As soon as Harry gave the goblet back to Lucius, a corona of magic burst from Harry and Snape, meshing together, and enveloping them both. As the magic faded, Snape felt euphoric. Harry, being just a child, was overcome with the euphoria, and started to crumple, bonelessly, to the ground. Snape caught him in his arms and knelt with the boy partially on his lap. James leaned over and touched Harry's forehead, before swirling out of existence. Lily remained a bit longer as she knelt by Snape. She, too, touched her son's forehead, but she specifically touched the lightning bolt scar. Her cold hand then very lightly touched Snape's hand. With a smile of her thanks to him, she faded away.

"Wow!" both Draco and Hermione exclaimed.

Several minutes later Harry's senses had stopped twirling and he found himself in his teacher's... no, his father's... private quarters on the sofa next to him. He sat up, stretched and then glanced down at the palm of his hand. There was no scar. He thought he might be disappointed, but he felt a pleasant warmth in his heart instead.

"Dad?" he asked softly. A part of him was still experimenting with that word and enjoying how it made him feel loved.

Snape gave his son a small smile, but to Harry it was a grin. He grinned back. "How do you feel, Harry."

"My heart feels warm," he observed, touching his hand to his chest.

"It will feel that way, probably, for the rest of the day and then it will fade. If you're steady enough on your feet, I need you to get to class so I can go to mine and teach before those ruffians upend everything," chuckled Snape.

Harry pouted. "I wish I didn't have to." He thought of his parents. Deep down he had worried for a bit as to whether or not they would mind if he got adopted, so it had eased his mind greatly to know that they had been there to approve of it. That made him feel warm inside, too.

Snape plucked his son up from the couch and gave him a nudge between the shoulder blades. "You may come for a visit after dinner. Now, go! I don't want you to wind up with a zero for today!"

"Yes, dad!" Harry grinned again as his heart bloomed once more with warmth. Seeing his bookbag by the door he caught it up in his hand, swung it onto his shoulder, and was soon running down the corridor with a pleased laugh on his way to Charms.

Snape was pleased, as well. He had hoped that he was doing the right thing by Harry, but he had to admit to himself that he was afraid that Lily, and very likely James, would disagree with Harry having him as a father. Not only had their presence been approval, but they had blessed the adoption as well. There would be no way on earth to refute or break it.

As he grabbed his teaching robes, he smiled smugly. Harry's scar was not a curse scar!

Harry was twenty minutes late to Charms and with no excuse because his father... my father!... had forgotten to give him a permission slip excusing the tardiness. So, he lost twenty points, but Harry didn't care. He had a father... my father!... now!

Snape arrived for his meeting with the Headmaster precisely at 6pm, just before dinner. As he walked through the quietly swinging open door, several dozen time pieces chimed or bonged or dinged or even ticked all around the office. Dumbledore's head was bent over a parchment, but as Snape faced the man's desk, he looked up with a smile. Snape certainly did not return it. In fact, his visage managed to become more granite-like; unmovable and expressionless.

"My boy, please sit down." The Headmaster was a bit non-plussed as his Potions instructor did not move an inch, other than to cross his arms across his chest and to deepen his dark gazed glower. Dumbledore watched the younger wizard for a moment, then sighed, and decided he wasn't going to put up with Severus' histrionics today. "Whatever you wish, then. I'd like to speak to you about Mr. Potter," he began.

"Yes, that is just who I'd like to speak of, Headmaster. Did you know?" Snape bit out.

Dumbledore felt his world tip a bit sideways. He was certain he'd had the upper hand here. "Know what?" he asked, genuinely puzzled.

Angrily Snape removed a phial that ended in a conical tip from his inner pocket. He slapped it down upon the Headmaster's desk. His glare became a razor edged scowl, accusing the man in front of him as if Dumbledore ought to know what was in the phial.

Dumbledore reached for the phial so he could better see the clear, cerulean blue liquid within. "I honestly don't know what this is, Severus. You know my Potions acumen is nowhere within your purview."

"Familia Testimonium," stated Snape dryly. "It is the potion most common in use at the Wizarding Childrens Services department of the Ministry. It is used to test the biological validity between parent and child. It becomes cerulean blue if there is a match." He then removed another phial, this one was corkscrew in shape and held within it a perfectly golden liquid that appeared heavy. As Dumbledore picked it up, it was heavier than the first. "Cruor Argumentum. This potion compares the DNA and Magical Cores of parent and child. If it becomes gold, it denotes an undeniable match of parent to child."

Dumbledore nearly felt roasted under the hard look he was getting from the Potions Master. He wanted to look up the two potions, but he didn't dare so in front of the younger man. He knew Snape would perceive it as an insult, and in the young wizard's mood, he might actually try to strike out at the Headmaster with a Killing Curse.

"Severus, I don't know what this is about so why don't you explain it to me," the Headmaster said in that cajoling, calm tone of his that worked with children and Order of the Phoenix members, and probably a few on the Wizengamot.

Inwardly, Snape smirked with triumph. This meeting was now in his hands, and whatever the Headmaster had meant to tell him was about to take a flaming leap out of the turret window. Outwardly, Snape affected an air of supreme worry with a touch of elation.

"I have learned that Harry Potter is my son," he stated dryly, and directly. "My biological son," Snape clarified.

Dumbledore felt a cold frisson of bony fingers dancing up his spine as he looked down upon the two potions. He didn't look up as he asked, "How did you learn this, Severus?"

Snape leaned over and picked up the potion in the conical phial that was cerulean blue. "Familia Testimonium is new on my curriculum for the first years. The ingredients are simple, common, and inexpensive ones that require a moderate effort at preparation. Brewing is just a bit more complicated but still within the ability of a first year to brew successfully." He sneered slightly, "True to the students penchants for stupidity, with the last ingredient, which is saliva, several chose to be supreme idiotic dunderheads and spat into their still boiling cauldrons. Some of them nearly singed their eyebrows off when they could have saved themselves a bit of pain by using the cotton swabs they'd been given!" He glowered over that remembrance.

Dumbledore eyed his Potions instructor warily. By the man's body language and tone, he did not detect any untruths in his narrative. He nodded in sympathy. "And how did your saliva become compared with Mr. Potter's, Severus?"

Snape waved his hand, as if to say Dumbledore ought to know this already. "A comparison was required to finish the potion so I used mine with everyones potion." He sighed, but his expression was hard. "Merlin forbid if the results came up and two of my students discovered they were related!" With dramatic effect, Snape suddenly slapped his hand down upon the Headmaster's desk, causing one of the phials to head towards the edge of the desk. "Merlin's crooked

teeth, Albus! How was I to know that instead of turning putrid yellow the damn potion would turn cerulean blue!"

Dumbledore caught the corkscrew phial and replaced it on his desk. He kept his hand upon it. "Then this potion was to verify the first?" he asked.

Snape nodded miserably.

"You have told him, Severus," Dumbledore stated instead of asking.

"Harry had the right to know, and I have the right to claim my son," Snape replied tautly.

Dumbledore's mind was awl as he felt the tug of his plans being yanked from beneath him. He drew in a deep breath, adapting as he must. "I must ask, my boy, how did this happen? Lily was married to James."

Before speaking, Snape silently asked Lily for her forgiveness in regards to the elaborate lie he would tell. Snape's eyes dropped to the floor and his spine stiffened as his cheeks blushed a dusty pink. He began to explain, "It was at the last gathering her parents ever had. A bar-b-que. I think if it had not been meant as a surprise birthday party for their daughter and anyone else but Lea Evans had been in charge of the guest list, I would not have been invited." Snape shifted as though he were uncomfortable under the Headmaster's steady stare. "I really had no intention of going, but before I realised it, I was walking through the old park behind Spinner's End and to the Evans' house."

To get away from Dumbledore's unending, accusing look, Snape began to pace. "I was welcomed by Lily's parents. I always was," his tone was haunted as he recalled the last time he'd seen the Evanses; just before his fifth year. Lily's parents were murdered by Death Eaters almost a month before Harry's birth. "There's really little to say about the party itself since the Marauders were there and once they knew I was there, it was as though we were back at Hogwarts. Only, we couldn't use our magic so all I had to put up with were their insults." He paused in his pacing and stared at the flames.



"Lily never did care for their teasing of you," Dumbledore spoke gently. Snape grunted, yet inwardly he was a little caught off guard by the Headmaster effortlessly embellishing his story.

"No," he said flatly, "she didn't. It may have been the reason..." Snape purposely faltered in his recitation. "We had not spoken once to each other since our fifth year... I do not... before I knew it Lily and I were in her childhood bedroom." His pacing resumed and his footsteps were clipped and reflected his sudden anger and embarrassment. "It was reckless and the second it was over, we both regretted what had been done. Lily was weeping and I... I could only run away."

"Something you did well," Dumbledore remarked, a hint of admonishment in his voice.

Snape glared darkly, insulted, but he kept his indignation to himself. He was tarnishing Lily's reputation, and her marriage, the least he could do was show himself as a coward.

The Headmaster's thin fingers drummed upon the surface of his desktop for a moment. "Now I understand why Lily demanded that you protect her son," he said softly. "She wasn't asking you as an old friend, but as the boy's father. She never told you?" Snape merely shook his head and took the chair across from the Headmaster's desk. Upon his face was a look that was a mixture of self-loathing, recrimination and regret. "This explains how Harry was Sorted into your House, too."

"Perhaps," Snape agreed grudgingly.

Dumbledore then asked something that shocked the Potions Master, "Do you wish to be the boy's father?"

Snape sat up, stiffly, his eyes now doing the glowering while his mouth sneered. "Did I say I did not want the boy? He is my son, Headmaster. Whether I want him or not, I have a responsibility to him. It is no longer enough that I keep to the Vow I made to Lily, I am his father and I will be his father."

Dumbledore's tongue actually clucked sadly. "This complicates everything, my boy."

Snape merely stared incredulously at the Headmaster and he did not need to feign that emotion. "As you requested at the beginning of this term, you wanted me to watch over and protect the boy. Your words, if you remember, Headmaster. The fact that Harry was Sorted into my House has made what could have been a complicated job much easier. So I fail to see what this new development complicates?"

The Headmaster sighed knowingly, leaving Snape to puzzle out this problem. It was one of the things that irritated him about the older wizard. "Has this to do with why you wanted to return him to the Dursleys?"

Dumbledore lifted his head from the book. "I would still prefer to send him back there, but as you are..."

Snape interrupted sharply, "No! That makes no sense that you would send Harry, no... any child back into a situation where they are beaten, starved, and verbally abused on a daily basis. Make me understand this, Albus!" he demanded.

The Headmaster put the book back on the shelf and then turned to his obviously distraught Potions instructor. Snape would be pleased to know that Dumbledore read that emotion in his posture and gaze when in reality he was angered, feeling homicidal, yet he was a bit curious.

"Sit down, my boy," ordered Dumbledore gently. Instead of retreating to his desk chair, he stood in front of the younger man, whom he was now able to look down upon. "I should have seen this coming, this bond between the two of you. Although I understand its origins, I do believe that you came to care for Harry long before learning he was your son." The old man sighed, and for a moment he looked over the younger man's shoulder into a past they had once shared in this office; when a frightened young man begged to be released from the shackles of Voldemort.

"Had I known just what you would find at the Dursleys, I would have sent someone else," he mused quietly.

Snape's lips thinned, wondering if he was going to get any sort of explanation, or more riddles.

For a moment the Headmaster turned away from Snape and Summoned a scroll tucked between several piles of paper and books not properly shelved. He unsealed it and handed it to Snape. "Look at the very first entry, my boy."

Snape's eyes scanned the heading of the scroll first and read silently, 'Accidental Magic – Harry James Potter.' His eyes then moved down to the very first incidence of magic, common Accidental Magic.

Age: 3 years, 9 months

The next three were various times during his fourth year. None of them explained why the magic occurred, or what had happened with the magical burst.

Dumbledore's index finger intruded, pointing to a more significant incident.

Age: 6 years, 2 months

Apparated to building roof

"He Apparated?" Snape let out a hiss of incredulity.

"Remarkable, isn't it?" agreed the Headmaster, his eyes twinkling madly. "Now, this one," Dumbledore pointed to another incident.

Age: 10 years, 11 months

Vanished glass partition

Dumbledore took the scroll and rolled it back up. "It was my intention to keep any untoward attention possible away from Harry, but at the age of six years old, the Ministry became aware of his whereabouts. The Blood Wards made it impossible for them to detect his presence at #4 Privet Drive, though, nor were they certain of the child's identity."

The Headmaster replaced the scroll from where he had Summoned it and smiled, "The development of Harry's magic has been remarkable! Madame Pomfrey tells me that it is quite likely that he also used his magic to heal many of his injuries."

Snape did not share the same... exuberance... that the Headmaster was expressing. It bothered him that in some way Dumbledore had been monitoring Harry's magic, yet the older wizard had never gone to see what precipitated those bursts of magic.

And healing himself? Such survival magic normally knocked out a full grown witch or wizard! No wonder the child was small. If Petunia had not fed him enough to make up for the amount of magic Harry used to heal himself, it was surprising that the boy had not expired!

Snape felt the anger at the Dursleys dangerously boiling within him. He had to calm it. After several seconds he was able to return his attention to the Headmaster.

"Headmaster, certainly this is startling, but you know the development of a child's magic is not that unusual under the circumstances," Snape commented. "With the establishment of the Wizarding Childrens Services in the twenties, more of this sort of thing is being seen."

Which was true. Studies were beginning to show that an abused child often went into a survival mode that honed their magic to help them cope with the abuse. Snape had first hand experience with this as his own father had beat him on a regular basis. He did have his mother to help heal him, but his magic had allowed him to hone his senses and his reflexes which enabled him, later, to evade many of the hexes and jinxes the Marauders plagued him with. Much later, he would use these skills as a spy. To Snape, the unfortunate aspect in this development, was that the child never struck back at their abusers with their magic; no matter how bad it became.

Suddenly, with unwelcome clarity, Snape understood. "You knew!" he hissed. "You knew about the abuse!"

The Potions Master recoiled as the Headmaster put a hand upon his shoulder. The hand was not dislodged. "I did not want to say anything to you because I knew you would react this way, Severus." Dumbledore's thin fingers gripped his shoulder tightly. "I knew that the Dursleys had no love for their nephew, my boy, but Arabella..."

Snape jerked very sharply and dislodged the offending hand but could not leave the chair he was in since Dumbledore stood in front

of him. "And that is supposed to excuse what they did to him for eleven years?"

"Severus," the older wizard said soothingly.

"Bones, Albus! They broke bones!" Snape's shouting made the older man move a few steps away from the younger man. "He has scars on his back! He was starved! His eyesight is permanently damaged because of their bloody loving touches! No love? The Dursleys despised my son and you allowed it to continue so his magic would develop?" Snape had pushed up from the chair knocking it backwards. In a rage, Snape spun sharply, and with his wand already in hand he blasted it to sawdust.

"Calm yourself, Severus!" The Headmaster's voice was firm, but infinitely gentle. Snape felt immediately, and inexplicably, afraid but he still retained enough sense to not show it. He took a deep breath, and leveled his darkest scowl upon the powerful wizard.

Dumbledore used his wand to Summon a new chair that he bade Snape to sit in. "Lily was Petunia's sister, my boy," Dumbledore continued on smoothly. "I saw no reason that she wouldn't at least treat the boy civilly. When I learned of their dislike for their nephew, I was not told of any abuse."

Snape recalled how Mrs. Figg had insisted that she never saw any bruises, abrasions, or any injuries upon his son. He had suspected that a Glamour hid the injuries, but now he was certain of it. "His magic hid the injuries," Snape breathed tautly.

To Snape's disgust, the Headmaster smiled, allowing a small twinkle of commiseration to appear in his eyes. "Ah! So you do see, my boy, don't you? Glammers are taught in seventh year, but to master them to hide such injuries so well, takes years! Harry is a very powerful wizard, Severus, you will..."

Snape interrupted, nearly hissing out, "Harry's a little boy!"

The twinkle in the Headmaster's baby blues went out like a candle snuffed out. "Voldemort will test him."

"Voldemort's dead," the Potions Master stated stonily. He resisted, with all of his will to keeping his right hand where it was and away from his hidden Dark Mark.

"Severus, please do not be so stubbornly foolish in regards to that falsehood. You were with me when we went to Godric's Hollow to search for remains. We used the most sophisticated of spells possible and there was no sign of anything! Not like there was of Lil..."

"Stop!" Snape pleaded tiredly. Of course he recalled that horrid day. Only hours after his acquittal before the Wizengamot the Headmaster had taken him to Godric's Hollow. It sickened him to see the ruins of the Potter house, to imagine the terror and screams, Lily's begging for the life of her child, embedded within the ruinous walls. He and the Headmaster had used old magic to seek out the remains of Voldemort and both had been subjected to memory ghosts of what had happened. It had nearly broken him, again.

They had found nothing. Not even a whisper, and this, both powerful wizards knew did not bode well.

Who would believe either of them, though? The wizarding world was far too ecstatic in the knowledge that an ugly stain was gone from their world. Harry Potter was a hero, and there were many that resented Dumbledore for having taken the boy away so he could not be paraded before his adoring audience.

As each year passed, peaceful and more beautiful than the last, it was Snape, Dumbledore, members of the Order of the Phoenix, and others of the Death Eaters who'd had no wish to be under the Dark Lord's thumb, that worried it was not entirely safe.

For Snape and Lucius, though, a night of pain, nightmares, and terror brought their fears into reality. Their Dark Marks awakened, almost as though angered and the Marks had burned, viciously.

Only for a moment did Snape wonder at his folly for adopting Harry. What right had he to do so? How could he properly care for the child if evil was already so close? He clenched his fists tightly against his worry. He had promised Lily he would protect her son and this was the only way he could do so.

No. It was the way he wanted to. Only hours had Harry been his son and it felt right, as it should be. The adoption had been blessed by the ghosts of their past. Snape would not allow anything, including a barmy, old Headmaster to jeopardise it.

Dumbledore breached the long silence by saying, "I believe what has happened so far to Harry is no coincidence, my boy. The odd fit in Quirinus' classroom, the accident in the Quidditch game, and the deaths and subsequent desertion of the unicorns."

"What deaths?" Snape asked, claiming ignorance of what he already knew.

"Four unicorns were killed, brutally," replied Dumbledore with infinite sorrow. "Their blood was taken. Hagrid informed me a few weeks ago that the unicorns had left, as have the Thestrals. The Centaurs, who usually keep themselves deep within the forest, are now patrolling the whole of it. Hagrid says that they have told him that 'evil hunts there at night'."

Snape's fingers pinched the bridge of his nose, hard, as he closed his eyes. This meeting was a nightmare he could not escape from.

"And you didn't feel this was necessary information to give to your staff that have helped you to guard that damned Stone?" Snape demanded angrily. He didn't give the older wizard a chance to reply as he let anger, at many things he couldn't express, free. "Do you know what this means, Albus? There's someone in this school that wants that Stone and means harm to Harry. Perhaps to all the children!" In mid-rant he had risen to his feet, pacing upon the floor, again.

"Perhaps to you?" Dumbledore added softly, perforating the Potions Master's ire like a balloon hit by a dart.

"What?" demanded Snape as he whirled back to face the Headmaster.

"Is it possible that you worry about yourself, Severus? You refuted Voldemort." Snape sneered as he was certain he detected a touch of smugness in the old man's smile.

"I don't give a bloody damn all to what he thinks of me! If he's even capable of thinking!" He drew his robe tightly about himself. "Merlin's teeth, Albus, doesn't it bother you at all that someone in this school is trying to bring Harry to harm? Do you think so little of him that you don't care about that? So much so that you would send him back into the arms of relatives that mean to harm him just as much? What is wrong with you?"

Snape was not doing well in keeping his temper down, but the Headmaster was pushing every button he had. He knew, though, that he had pushed a button right back; blasted it, really. Dumbledore's glare was as angered as the revulsion the old man had shown him the first time he had asked for sanctuary and had been refused.

The Potions Master expected to be threatened with Azkaban, and he was prepared to let go of that Ace, if need be. Such a threat was not forthcoming, though.

With chilly calm, the old wizard spoke and Snape felt, once again, compelled by the wizard's voice to step backwards in fear of Dumbledore's magic. "Voldemort IS returning. The Philosopher's Stone is here because it is the best place to trap him and to weaken him further. Harry will see to that, or he will prove to me that he is but a shell of the child he once was."

This dry statement shook the younger man. Aghast, he hissed in final comprehension as to why the Headmaster did not trust the little boy, "You believe Harry to be the Dark Lord!" With Dumbledore's sad nod of his aged head, Snape clamped his mouth tightly shut. He could not sort out what he was feeling. To say anything could open him to a trap he could not easily free himself from, and he had to be there for his son. Allowing the cold, stone-faced visage that many were familiar with drift over him like a Disillusionment Spell, he calmed his heart and tightened his Occlumency shields. In doing so, he felt the ham-fisted tendrils of the Headmaster's mind touching his; something the older wizard had not done in years.

That weak attempt gave Snape a vital bit of information about the old man's magic that he'd never before realised. He could not explore it, yet, for the Headmaster still had something to say.



Dumbledore rose and walked smoothly over to Snape and put a friendly hand upon the man's forearm, just above the hidden Dark Mark. Snape saw the gesture, not as one of affection, but as a reminder of his debt to the Headmaster and to the Light. Snape, did not flinch from the touch, but forced himself to lean, gratefully, into it.

"My boy," the Headmaster almost crooned to him, "I did not wish to say anything this early because I had hoped that I would be wrong about Harry. It is still possible that I am, but we will only know that to be a certainty if Voldemort is elsewhere in this castle and the Stone draws him out."

Snape shook his head. "Harry is not the next Dark Lord, Albus. You're wrong," Snape declared stubbornly. Dumbledore's voice, his mind whispered to him. The wizard's voice was manipulating his emotions, calming him, making him see reason. Using his Occlumency he was able to know the emotion that the Headmaster wanted to see in his body language and hear in his tone. Snape lowered his voice, giving it a touch of lost hope. "He is a sweet, gentle child..."

"He was Sorted into Slytherin," Dumbledore cut across the Potions Master's kind words. The Headmaster held up his hand to forestall another rant from the younger man – this one on his Gryffindor habit of tossing all Slytherins to the wolves. "The House of Voldemort," the Headmaster emphasised. "You see a child unfairly treated, Severus, and you cannot help but rescue him. I do not have that luxury since I knew Voldemort when he was Tom Riddle and a child much the same age as Harry."

Snape listened, despite the desire to strike out verbally. The older wizard's voice was soothing in its sad revelation as it took him back into the past and painted a grim picture for him. Knowing that Dumbledore's persuasive magic was in his voice, Snape was now able to filter out those false emotions from his own. As the narrative unfolded, the clever Potions Master allowed those emotions Dumbledore wanted to see and hear all the while, feeling exuberant that he'd thrown off another shackle.

The Headmaster continued to speak of the young Tom Riddle, the boy lost in a Muggle orphanage and abused by children and adults. His accidental magic had struck out in anger, vengeance, violently. It was that violence that had drawn the younger Dumbledore to the

worst side of Muggle London and into a neighborhood that had not seen improvement since the days when a terrifying killer of prostitutes had sent fear through the Muggle population.

Snape was quiet as the older man continued to relate the story of a frightening encounter with a boy who could conjure pain in another with his thoughts alone. The harming of another did not cause the boy remorse or guilt, yet when the Headmaster told him how 'special' he was, odd, maroon coloured eyes had glittered.

"Perhaps, if I had known what I was bringing into our world, I might have acted differently," Dumbledore sighed regretfully, unaware that his Voice was no longer influencing his young Potions instructor's sympathy.

"Why do you compare Harry to Riddle, Headmaster? Neither sound at all alike to me," Snape spoke almost without inflection. He truly was growing tired of this endless meeting and his migraine was returning.

"Oh, their personalities are rather different, my boy, but their powers are not and that is what worries me about Harry." The Headmaster tapped his forehead. "And his scar." Dumbledore Summoned a book from his shelf and handed it over to Snape who scanned the title quickly: Curse Scars: What We Know. "That is just one of hundreds of books I have read over the years about curse scars, and that, like the others, have simply told me that curse scars are unpredictable."

"So it is Harry's scar that makes you think he could be the next Dark Lord?" asked Snape as he dropped the book onto Albus' desk with a slight thump.

"It was made when Voldemort tried to kill the boy, Severus, and Harry survived!" Dumbledore glared at nothing in frustration. "However, no one, no book, no essay, nothing can tell me why." His gaze settled upon Snape and the younger man felt distinctly what his eventual betrayal of the man before him would do to him. "Which is why I need you to watch the boy, Severus. If he is... what I am afraid he is..." the Headmaster's voice faded.

"What do you wish of me, Headmaster?" he asked in perfectly feigned irritated resignation.

Dumbledore smiled sublimely as he stretched out a hand to touch the younger man's shoulder. "I am glad you are seeing reason, Severus." He moved behind his desk and then seated himself. "It is important that we know if Harry is still... your son, or if he has become untrustworthy. So far you have seen nothing out of sorts since that time in Quirinus' class?" Snape shook his head. "Good. Watch him for me, Severus, but you must allow him to do what comes natural."

"You expect him to act like a Gryffindor?" sneered Snape.

Dumbledore chuckled. "Ah no, dear boy! I expect him to be just what he is, a child that is curious. Detention, if you must, but as he is one of your Snakes, allow him a bit of leeway." Dumbledore's eyes twinkled merrily. Returning to his paperwork, Snape understood he was dismissed.

As soon as Snape was through the Headmaster's office door and it was closed behind him, he fled down the stairs and down the dungeons to his personal quarters. Sealing his quarters with additional wards and a silencing spell, he threw Floo powder into the flames as he knelt upon the hearth.

"Malfoy Manor!" he shouted, hardly out of breath.

As soon as the Floo was opened, Snape stuck his head into the green flames and shouted into the echoing parlor that was the main receiving room.

"Lucius! Lucius! Come quick!" he demanded.

Lucius, who had been eating dinner with his wife, came at a dead run to the parlor. Thoughts of Draco having gotten injured flashed through his mind as he hit the hearth with a quickly cast Cushioning Charm and his knees.

"Severus?"

"It's Dumbledore! Come through! We need to talk, now!" Snape ordered and then his head vanished.

Lucius rose from his hearth and grabbed a handful of Floo powder. "Snape's quarters at Hogwarts!" In moments he stepped through the

green flames and into Snape's living room. He was handed a measure of firewhiskey.

"What's going on, Severus?" demanded Lucius without drinking the liquor. "You've frightened ten years off of me!"

"I just came from my meeting with Dumbledore," Snape said angrily as he slammed himself into his favourite chair. "He has the magic of Voice," he ground out harshly.

Lucius lowered himself into an opposite chair and nodded slowly in understanding. "So that's how the old wizard manages it!" Lucius smiled appraisingly before looking at his disgruntled friend. "Voice magic has been forbidden since Nicolas Flamel was a young man."

"It was a talent Flamel excelled at," sniped Snape. "No doubt he taught it to Dumbledore."

There was quiet for a few minutes and then Lucius asked, "Severus, as remarkable as the knowledge is about the Headmaster, I know you didn't ask me here for this. What is the trouble?"

"Dumbledore has set up the Stone as more than just a test for Harry, it's a trap. He believes that the abuse the Dursleys put the child through strengthened his magic, but he also believes that it might have released something else..." Snape couldn't voice it.

"The Dark Lord," Lucius finished smoothly. The patrician then drank the liquor in his glass. "Tell me all of it, Severus."

So, for the next ten minutes, Snape recited the meeting he'd had with Dumbledore to Lucius. When he was finished, he stood up to refill his glass from the decanted firewhiskey bottle, and Lucius, very quietly, swore.

"He's mad," Lucius finally concluded.

"That and someone, possibly Voldemort himself, is in this castle and trying to kill my son!" Snape spouted vehemently as he dropped back into his chair. "What can be done, Lucius?"

"Mad though he is, if the Dark..." Lucius still found it hard to use his old master's name, but he bit his tongue and continued, "if

Voldemort is attempting to come back, then we need Dumbledore, madness or no."

"And if someone gets hurt?" asked Snape a bit too caustically. "Or if my son decides to go after that stupid Stone?"

Lucius gave Snape a short glare before positing his solution, "Let the old man have his way, Severus. Finding Voldemort and dealing with him will be up to us. I do wonder, though, if it is him, how has he managed to come back?"

"Necromancy," Snape replied easily. He then looked at his friend who seemed rather shocked, and the Potions Master's left eyebrow rose slightly. "Don't tell me you've forgotten the Night of the Inferi, have you?"

Inferi were corpses, the dead animated by the power of a Dark Wizard. Voldemort, who had had considerable necromantic skills was particularly good at animating the dead.

Lucius shuddered and nodded. The Night of the Inferi was probably one of the most nightmarish events that Voldemort had ever held. The Dark Lord's army of Inferi numbered in the thousands and had marched against the town of Dobro, a wizarding town on the coast of Wales. Although many Inferi were destroyed, the town of Dobro was nothing by the time the sun rose. Haunted by that night, Dobro remained dead, and its loss was considered by Voldemort one of his victories.

It also served to give many of the Death Eaters persistent nightmares of that night.

"A body was never found," said Snape, as he glared at the bottom of his empty glass. "After my acquittal, I went to Godric's Hollow myself to cast spells for any trace of remains and there was nothing to be found."

"Then he's not a ghost," grimaced Lucius.

Snape shook his head slowly. "Did you ever really think so?" the Potions Master sneered.

Lucius glared darkly at his friend. "Do not speak to me as if I am a fool, Severus. You know as well as anyone that it is not my death I fear if he comes back, but that of my family."

Snape sighed and shook his head in regret for his harsh words. "I fear the same for Harry, Lucius. However, it appears I not only have to be wary of the return of a Dark Lord, but of a mad Headmaster."

"Albus Dumbledore is easily dealt with by using the law against him," replied Lucius blithely. "However, we must be quit of Voldemort for certain or that old man will find a way to evade legal grasp."

A knock upon Snape's door interrupted them both. Snape frowned, certain he wasn't expecting anyone, then he touched the bridge of his nose. "Harry! I invited him here after dinner."

Lucius smiled and walked over to the Floo. "I'll leave you to a pleasant evening with your son, then, Severus." He threw a handful of Floo powder into the flames. "Malfoy Manor!" Before stepping through, he glanced over his shoulder. "Be thankful that the Headmaster has shown his hand so soon, my friend. It allows us to better be on our guard." The patrician then stepped through the green flames and vanished.

Another knock, this time a bit more tentative sounded, drawing Snape from his chair and from his dour thoughts. He opened the door to his quarters and looked down upon the shy smile of his son.

"I know you said after dinner, and it's not quite, but I didn't see you in the Great Hall and I got sort of worried, sir," babbled Harry.

Snape ushered his son into his quarters and shut the door behind him. "I merely had an inordinately long meeting with the Headmaster, Harry. Did you eat dinner, or were you too worried for me?" The older man smirked pleasantly as Harry's cheeks coloured.

"I had juice," Harry replied.

"Hardly enough to send you off to bed properly. Come join me since I missed mine."

Snape found it odd, endearing, and satisfying that Harry, even at his age, liked to cuddle. He supposed a great deal of that had to do with the fact that Harry's erstwhile relatives gave him the back of their hands instead of giving the boy the affection he craved. Snape, himself, found it rather strange that he was so willing to give his son the affection he wanted.

Snape was no stranger to embraces, comfort, or hugs. He just didn't care for unwanted touch. As the Head of Slytherin House he often had to comfort homesick first years, but he had gotten quite good at delegating the more prolonged comfort to his prefects. He chose his prefects for their ability to comfort, and to advise. They were, in a sense, big brother and sister to the Snakes of all ages.

Of the staff it was Pomona Sprout who was the most gregarious with her affections. No one escaped her hugs, and no one was ever without her triple chocolate brownies at Christmas. Snape smirked to himself as he looked forward to Christmas this year because of those blasted brownies. Much better than the crazy socks Dumbledore insisted upon giving everyone.

"Am I gonna change, dad?" Harry had been practicing his reading for the last fifteen minutes when he asked the question, seemingly out of the blue.

"You mean from the potion?" he asked to clarify the question.

"Yeah... I mean, yes, sir... uhm... dad." Harry loved the fact he had a father now, but it was difficult to remember he had permission to call the man he had named 'dad' in his dreams. "Draco said that since our magic and DNA mixed, I'll look like you."

Snape ran his fingers through the still recalcitrant raven hair of his son's. "Would that bother you, Harry?"

"Not really," he shrugged. "I mean, it would be kind of neat to look like you. I wish it would fix my eyes, though." Harry picked at a corner of a page in his book.

"I'm sure you'll take on a few minor characteristics of mine, but there really is nothing that can be done about your eyesight," Snape said with a slight tone of regret.

Harry grinned, a bit smugly. He wriggled out from under his father's arm and ran over to his bookbag that was in the corner by the clothes tree. Slightly puzzled and curious, Snape watched as the boy rummaged through his bag and then came back with a slim magazine he handed to his father.

"Draco told me his dad's got reading glasses and is going to get some experimental thing done in Paris to fix them so Draco gave me this book that's all about eye injuries and some of the new healing spells there are to help."

Snape took the magazine and slowly thumbed through it. His brow was furrowed in thought. When he realised Harry was waiting for a response, he closed the magazine. "Let me read through this and do some research, son." Harry let out a relieved sigh. "I'll speak to your Oculist and we'll see if there are alternatives to your glasses."

"I hope so," said Harry settling back under his father's arm. He allowed Snape to adjust them both for comfort. "I keep thinking I'll lose my glasses at practice or they'll get broken."

"During practice and the games we can use a Sticking Charm to keep them from falling off your face. As for them breaking, that's already been taken care of when we visited the Oculist. One of the many protection charms is an Unbreakable Charm."

"Oh," Harry simply replied.

Snape gave the boy a small smile and then tapped his book. "Fifteen minutes and then it's time to return to your dorm."

Harry opened his book, prepared to read, when he paused. "Do you think I'm improving, si... dad?"

"You're doing very well, Harry. I think that since your relatives did not wish for you to read was the only thing making you hesitant when you read aloud. Your comprehension is excellent and you must read well silently to understand your textbooks." He grimaced thinking about those blasted Dursleys. Since the Headmaster knew that Harry was his son and he would claim him, he was now free to wreak a bit of retribution on those insidious Muggles. Time to consider that later as he wanted to pay attention to his son now.



"Tomorrow I'll have some sums for you to do since I want to see how your Maths are."

"What do I need Maths for?" Harry asked genuinely curious.

"Potions, for theory in Transfiguration, Astronomy, and in Arithmancy." He replied.

"Well, okay. For Potions that's all right but everything else... bleh!" Harry giggled as his father lightly poked his side.

"Read, my little idiot." Snape pulled his son a bit closer to his side. Yes, he was pleased that Harry liked to cuddle.

A/N: Not quite as long as other chapters but I re-wrote the scene with Snape and Dumbledore at least three times before getting it where I wanted it. If you liked or hated it, or if it was confusing, let me know.

I have a poll on my profile you may be interested in. It regards whether or not there should be a romantic interest for Snape in this story. The results of the poll will be played out at the Malfoy Winter Ball.

Wednesday, Oct. 16, 1991

Minerva McGonagall was fidgeting, something she rarely did. She had reason to, though. A hand lightly touched her elbow and she started as she found herself looking up at her colleague, Severus Snape.

"Are you well, Minerva?" he asked sotto voce.

A glare flared briefly upon her face before it faded to be replaced by tired resignation. "I am fine, Severus," she whispered just as the Headmaster arrived in the Staff Room.

"Good morning, everyone!" he greeted cheerily.

Dumbledore was greeted with varying degrees of cheerfulness, depending on how much sleep one had the night before. Snape, who never greeted anyone, went over to the sideboard where fresh coffee and tea waited. He poured himself a cup of the black brew and then a second cup of tea. He slipped something into the tea and then handed it to Minerva.

Minerva sipped the tea and was pleased to be greeted with the burn of her favorite Scotch laced within the tea. She smiled thankfully to Snape who nodded curtly.

Snape barely registered what the Headmaster was blathering on so cheerfully about. Usually it had to do with how the children were doing in classes, where the points were – Ravenclaw was currently ahead trailed by Slytherin and Hufflepuff. Gryffindor was still reeling from the points losses that had occurred from the attack on Miss Granger. The rest of the meeting dealt with the annoying, upcoming Halloween party for the lower years and the Halloween ball for the upper years. Chaperones for the ball were volunteered and Snape quietly smirked as the Notice-Me-Not Charm that he'd recently discovered worked wonders in the staff meeting. He was free from chaperone duties for the ball. Unfortunately, he had no choice but to volunteer as a monitor for the lower years party since there were hardly any teachers left to be volunteered. That duty he wouldn't mind so much as it would allow him to keep an eye on his son.

There was more, of course, but Snape only gave the Headmaster's discourse the attention it deserved, which was practically none. He'd rather be back in bed.

His night had not been a good one as he'd turned over the conversation with the Headmaster repeatedly in his mind until almost three in the morning. Unfortunately, just as he'd fallen back to sleep, the monitor spell that he'd put on Harry a few days ago woke him; the nightmares were back.

He had transfigured his pyjamas into a simple shirt and trousers and threw on the spare set of teaching robes he kept draped on the end of his bed for such eventualities.

In the dorm he'd found Draco cowering in his bed and he could immediately see why. Harry had not thrown up a Silencing Charm, but neither was he screaming out loud. His mouth was apart in a fearsome, pained, very angered looking rictus and his arms and legs were so stiff and taut that Snape feared they might break.

He had stretched out a hand to touch his son and was startled when the boy's eyes snapped open and he was greeted not with the familiar, gentle viridian, but angry maroon eyes and an unrecognisable voice that hissed, "Traitor!" Snape was then hit by a burst of magic that threw him against Draco's bed.

In that burst of magic the hold the nightmare had on Harry was broken and the distraught boy had burst into tears and curled up into himself. Draco had clambered out of his bed to see if his Head of House was all right. Snape was a bit winded, but he recovered quickly at the sound of his son's anguished sobs. Upon his feet, he strode over to the boy.

Snape had drawn his son into his lap while Draco sat uneasily on the foot of the bed, his concern wrinkling his brow. It was almost a half hour before the boy could talk and what he said was enough to give the Potions Master nightmares.

"I killed a Centaur!"

It took nearly an hour to put his son back to sleep after that confession and to also assure Draco that all would be well and that he would look into what was going on.

The thing was that Snape really had no idea where to begin. Since he had been unable to go to sleep he had sat at his desk with a pot of coffee, parchment, quill, and ink, and tried to work it all out.

Why was Harry having these horrific visions? And they were visions. He had no doubt that if he spoke to Hagrid today he would hear of Centaurs having been killed. What an utter cock-up!

If the Headmaster had been correct about Harry's scar being a curse scar, then Snape would understand a connection between the small boy and the Dark Wizard. Yet, it was now obvious the scar was what Lucius had said it was; a very powerful rune of protection. He remembered when during the adoption, Lily had touched her child's scar, and then him. He felt more than just the euphoria of the potion, the ritual, and the magic. He'd felt infinitely connected to his son. It was as though some of Lily's protection for Harry had washed over him.

Snape's right hand drifted over his left forearm. Only just now did he realise that, for once, the Dark Mark failed to exude the phantom malevolence he'd felt from it when it awakened during the summer.

Snape then glanced over at the purple-turbaned professor who was doing a poor imitation of trying to listen, to smile politely, and to look at ease during the meeting.

Can anyone be that painfully awkward? He wondered to himself. He was almost caught off guard by a sudden, very brief glance of absolute hatred from Quirrell. Snape barely caught the gasp that threatened as pain tore through his left arm. This was not the angry fire of summoning that he remembered when he was a Death Eater. This was pain that caused alarm deep within his bones, giving him the awful imperative to run! When Snape blinked, the pain vanished, almost as though it had never been, and upon Quirrell's face was one of those uneasy smiles. Not a single thing about the man's posture hinted at a hatred for anything. In fact, he seemed rather loopily interested in Madame Hooch.

Urgh. That would not bear thought, at all, he harrumphed to himself and crossed his arms over his chest. Is this meeting not over, yet?

Leaving those thoughts aside, Snape mentally prepared for today's classes, and then drifted over to the more enticing prospect of the arrival of the first snow and the bloom of Snowbells in the Forbidden Forest.

Snape usually found Snowbells not too far into the forest, and although he'd check with Hagrid first, he hoped it would be all right to gather them. He wanted to bring Harry with him, and Draco and Hermione had also expressed interest in the Snowbells. To see a magical flower blooming with the fall of the snow was a beautiful...

"...resigning. Effective this Friday," Minerva said in her staunch, crisp Brogue.

Snape sat up sharply. What did he miss? As he listened to his colleagues consoling the Deputy Headmistress, he quickly learned that she had resigned from her post as Deputy Headmistress. After several minutes of conciliatory gestures from Pomona, Rolanda Hooch, Sinistra, and even dotty Trelawney, who for once didn't have any dire predictions at hand, Minerva sat down, her hands in her lap, and her head bowed.

The meeting ended, then. Everyone filed out quickly, and Snape was unaware of Dumbledore beating a rather inelegant, hasty retreat. Snape glanced to his right seeing that Minerva had not moved.

"I suppose you're happy about this, Severus," she said for lack of anything else to say, but to break the awkward silence between them.

"Should you not be as well, Minerva?" he asked coldly, feeling insulted at her unwarranted comment. "After all, as I recall you have wanted to leave the position of Deputy Headmistress for nearly five years."

The rebuke did sting, so Minerva chose to ignore it. "You're still going to testify against me, aren't you?"

"Yes, I am," he replied without hesitation. He then leaned towards her slightly, and spoke softly, his tone lacking the cold that had been there before, "I am, however, not against you."

Minerva found the will to stand, then, and she did so. Her hand lightly brushed his shoulder. With a slight smile she said, "Thank you, Severus." And then she left.

Breakfast in the Great Hall seemed to be uneventful. Snape, in no mood for food, had a very strong cup of coffee that could probably strip lead from steel. Every once in awhile his eyes, scanning across all the students, settled upon his son.

Harry was chatting quietly with Draco, but both of them appeared subdued. After last night's strange event it was no wonder. Snape vowed, for the umpteenth time, that he would get to the bottom of those visions that Harry was having. He understood if the scar was for protection, but it was, it seemed, opening Harry up to something that it shouldn't. Perhaps Lucius might have a clue.

At that moment the mail owls swooped in to deliver the day's mail. A Daily Prophet dropped next to his coffee cup, but Snape ignored it as his mind drifted once more over last night. After several minutes a rise in the childish hub-bub and a gasp from Minerva wrested him from his ruminations.

Snape glanced over to see his colleague's stricken face as she stared at an article in the Daily Prophet. The Potions Master snatched up his copy and saw at once the headlines that had everyone's attention. He quickly read:

## HOUSE GRYFFINDOR ATTACKS THEIR OWN!

Muggleborn student in infirmary after almost being killed by three of her own Housemates!

In a recent development a source, who wishes to remain anonymous, has drawn our attention to the devastating goings-on at Hogwarts.

According to our source, muggle-born student, Hermione Granger, one of the most promising of the first years, of House Gryffindor, was almost killed by her own Housemates!

Yes, dear readers, you read right.

The harassment Miss Granger had to endure at the hands of all her housemates – even seventh years! – since day one finally escalated into an all-out, brutal, attempted homicide.

After further investigation, other sources tell us this was not the first time, and that, in fact, the poor girl had already become almost a permanent resident in the Infirmary. Repeated pleas by Miss Granger for either an intervention or a resorting have not been received well by Professor Minerva McGonagall, Deputy Headmistress and Head of House Gryffindor.

According to her fellow students, Miss Granger's treatment by her House is the direct result of her friendship with Harry Potter, the Boy-Who-Lived, and Draco Malfoy, son of Lucius Malfoy, both Slytherins.

Apparently it was declared that any friend of the Boy-Who-Lived was to be regarded as an enemy of House Gryffindor.

As you know, dear readers, the enmity between Gryffindor and Slytherin has always been legendary. The ancient halls of Hogwarts have seen many a fight between the two Houses over the centuries.

Yet it all seems to have reached scandalous dimensions. While we do not know the exact extent of her injuries, as a visit to Miss Granger has been limited and strictly controlled, the lack of information should speak for itself.

Inquiries at the Ministry have revealed a shocking lack of Auror investigation in this case, for indeed, no one had formally been alerted.

What is going on here? Are Gryffindors standing with the Death Eaters then?

Who are these would-be murderers? Who is Albus Dumbledore, Headmaster of Hogwarts and Chief of the Wizengamot, trying to protect?

And what exactly does this mean for the safety of our children?

Inquiring minds demand to know!

Snape suppressed a snort of amusement. He didn't care that Minerva was so publicly hoist by her own petard; he had expected it at some point, but her shame served well to cast a heavy shadow of irresponsibility onto the Headmaster. His desk was going to be swamped with Howlers from parents by the afternoon. Snape thought it fitting revenge for that hideous meeting last night.

The Potions Master glanced to the side not to see Minerva but to see the Headmaster's reaction to the article. He caught no glimpse of the twinkle and the old man's lips were pale thin as they pressed together. The old wizard was not happy. And Snape was in the most pleasant mood he'd been in since he'd gained a son.

Snape finished his coffee and then left the staff table. Instead of vanishing through the narrow door that led to the staff room and beyond, he stepped down from the dais and walked over to his Slytherins. Knowing that everyone would lose their speculation and gossip over the article, Snape purposefully touched his son's shoulder and gave him a smile; not a big one, for those were infinitely rare, and not for public consumption. There was, however, a touch of a smile, and a bit of warmth to his eyes that he knew Harry would understand.

Harry did understand the gesture and smiled up at his father. In that brief moment of recognition between father and son, neither saw the wondering glances of many of the Slytherins (nor the smug smile of Draco), and neither did either of them pay attention to the outright gawkish, jaw-dropped stares of the other students (most being Gryffindors). Unfortunately, what neither saw also, was a venomous look upon Professor Quirrell's face accompanied by a brief flash of red. It was quickly gone, though, replaced by his usual awkward smile and slightly puzzled expression.

Snape wrote, and sent, the following letter to Lucius after a business-like owl deposited a set of papers on his desk after his first class.

Lucius,

I see you spoke to Rita Skeeter. An adequate and concise conversation despite Miss Skeeter's attempts to embellish beyond



normal convention. The Headmaster appeared most displeased, I observed.

At lunch I received official notification from the WCS that they have confirmed that I am, indeed, the biological father of one Harry Potter. All paperwork has been dealt with and the familial rights the Dursleys could have contested before no longer apply. I expect a Ministry announcement in The Daily Prophet, soon.

Your investigator may do what he wishes for Harry's cousin, but not until after I have dealt, personally, with those Muggles.

I also received a letter from the goblin in charge of the Potter vault – that which is all that is left for their son. Griphook wishes to meet with me on Saturday about it and congratulated me on my 'superb, Slytherin machinations'.

The first years are wondering what will be done about Quidditch little league. It seems the teams are all in a dither after having lost three of their players. You will rectify this matter?

Sincerely,

S. Snape

Lucius wrote a reply to Snape before working on his books for the Malfoy estate and dealing with the business of the day. At one point, while working on his correspondence, Narcissa interrupted with a small cup of a tea, and a kiss to his cheek. He thought about cooking dinner that night and was entirely unaware of the wicked gleam in his eye and the anticipatory smile upon his lips.

Severus,

I had hoped you'd enjoy Miss Skeeter's revelatory article. The Headmaster was disturbed, was he? Oh dear!

I am re-organising the little league teams and I will be there this Saturday to let them know what is going on. I had a bit of fine assistance from Miss Granger who is looking forward to being released on Thursday. She will not be moving back into Gryffindor, though. Madame Pomfrey has set up a small corner in the Infirmary for her. Professor McGonagall did approve the Petition for re-Sorting

and it is now being reviewed by the Board of Governors. I believe we shall have the young lady re-Sorted before Halloween.

I have found a very small portion of the Potter estate. Since I have purchased the items, I should like to present them as a gift to your son at Christmas. If that is agreeable to you, then I would like to invite you and your son to Malfoy Manor for the holidays. Miss Granger will be staying with us, and her parents will visit the Manor on Christmas Eve, and Christmas Day. I believe that Draco would be beside himself to have his two best friends here.

Narcissa wishes to remind you that you have yet to accept our invitation to the Winter Ball. Certainly may I tell her that you'll be pleased to attend?

Cordially,

L. Malfoy

Snape returned from tea and a discussion with the Keeper of the Grounds that afternoon, skipping lunch, of course, to find Lucius' reply. As he had a few minutes before class began, he sat down at his desk to write, deciding he would ask his old friend about Harry's scar.

Lucius,

I mentioned very briefly to you about Harry's nightmares. He is also having another type of night terror that I am convinced are visions. It all seems to be connected to his scar.

I am very concerned after his latest vision. He dreamt of killing a Centaur. However, before he exhaustively blurted that out, he was very clearly possessed by the Dark Lord. His eyes changed from green to blood red and then he called me a 'traitor' and blasted me across the room. Harry recalls the vision but has no memory of what was said, nor of what he did.

Why would his scar be doing this?

I visited Hagrid today...

During what would have been lunch, Snape dressed in his warm, heavy woolen cloak, gloves, and pulled the cowl of his cloak over his head.

Outside the castle the wind was chilly today telling Snape that the first snowfall would be here very soon. As the ground was beginning to harden, Snape moved swiftly, but carefully so as not to slip and fall as he made his way to Hagrid's hut.

Snape found the half-giant harvesting his huge pumpkins. Fang, who'd been curled up against the door, sniffed the air, scenting something familiar, and lifted his large head. Flowers! One of his favourite humans had come to visit. Fang stood, shook the sleep from his body, and took a few puppy-like bounces to reach Flowers.

The Potions Master took several moments to greet the great boarhound and then stuck his hand into one of his pockets where he withdrew a few hard biscuits just for the large dog. Fang bounced again as he snatched all three biscuits at once, and then trotted back over to the small porch.

"Hello, Perfessor!" greeted Hagrid. "Bit chilly ta be out visitin'."

"Greetings, Hagrid," Snape nodded congenially.

The large machete that Hagrid was using to sever his pumpkins from their thick vines he stabbed into a hay bale. He then clapped his hands, and then wiped them on his vest.

"Kin I make ye some tea, Perfessor?" asked Hagrid as he motioned the wizard towards his hut.

"Yes, please," nodded Snape following the half-giant.

Hagrid truly knew how to brew an English tea and the Potions Master resolved to just simply visit the half-giant Keeper of the Grounds more often. The man's rock cakes were another matter, though, and as Snape slyly secreted his to Fang, he wondered how the boarhound's teeth were faring. He made a silent, mental note to himself to brew and send a Dog Dental Strengthening Potion to Hagrid. For now, he needed to ask the question he'd come about.

"The Headmaster tells me that the Centaurs are still patrolling the Forest," he said conversationally.

"Aye, they are, Perfessor," Hagrid shook his shaggy head mournfully. "I bin talkin' to Firenze? He's the most genial of the lot. I'm thinkin' he has no mindin' of wizard-folk like most of the Centaurs do. Bane, he's the one most vocal about wizards and he's a'blamin' us for the evil that's in the Forest now."

"What's been going on?" asked Snape. "You told me of the unicorns departure."

"Aye, an' the Thestrals. I think's the Blood Fae'er dead, though." Snape was shocked by this.

The Blood Fae, as pretty as the Muggle depiction of faeries, were really vicious creatures that bit and could, if bothered, attack en masse and cause a witch or wizard a great deal of damage.

"Why do you think they're dead, Hagrid?" Snape held out his empty cup for more tea. The large man poured from the chipped, clay pot, and then dropped another rock cake onto Snape's mismatched plate.

"Nest's gone, she is. Burnt to a crisp. Ain't seen any since I found th' nest all burned up." Hagrid sighed heavily. "But that's not the worst, Perfessor. The Centaurs is bein' attacked now."

Snape felt the trickle of ice down his spine. He knew his son's dream had been a vision, but to have it confirmed, so easily, by the half-giant, made it too real. "How many?" he asked, willing his hands not to tremble. "What happened to them?"

"Jus' two, but I s'pose one's even too much. One was a Wise One, Pinchon, by name. Last night was, Ardella. Seem's Ardella's eldest, Colchis, saw the attack and tried to kill the hunched beast that had her, but his arrow bounced away. Like it were a Shield Charm roun' tha beast. When the hunched beast ran off, the clan went to Ardella, but she were a'dyin'. Couldn't even say nothing because 'er throat were gone. Nearly all 'er blood, too." Hagrid put aside the remainder of his tea, unable to drink anymore.

Centaur blood was almost as sacred as unicorn blood, but whereas the unicorn did not blame all of wizarding kind when one of them was hurt or killed, the truce between Centaur and wizard-kind was an uneasy one. Snape knew without a doubt that these killings were trouble.

It would be a conflict that would be nothing like the war with Voldemort. This would be a battle that would be short, vicious, and more than likely would end with the decimation of the Centaurs.

The last clan of Centaurs lived in the Forbidden Forest, having been given sanctuary there from the time of the Founders. For all that time they had lived in contentment, away from wizards, able to raise their families without interference from the Ministry. Snape had no wish to see an end to such magical beings.

"Has Firenze said anything about what the Centaurs will do?" asked Snape worriedly.

Hagrid shrugged. "I tol' Firenze he ought to take his lot, follow the unicorn, but Bane's insistin' that the Forbidden Forest is theirs. They mean to stay put an' perfect it."

Snape sighed, "I suppose it would be too dangerous to gather Snowbells at the first snow, then." He really had hoped to take Harry with him on that little sojourn.

Hagrid smiled, "Nah! Don' you worry none about that, Perfessor. Me an' Fang still go into the Forest so's we'll be escortin' ye."

For extra reassurance, Fang, who'd been under the table all that time, slipped his heavy head onto Flowers' thigh. Flowers gave the dog a small smile and stroked the broad head.

...after my meeting with Hagrid I spoke briefly to the Headmaster about my worry for the Centaurs. Wisely, the old man is just as concerned as he is worried that should they turn on wizard-kind, they would most assuredly attack Hogwarts. The Centaurs would have no compunction in harming our children – this was voiced by Dumbledore. He suggested, and I agreed, that the wards around Hogwarts need to be reinforced. All the staff are to help and I added that you should help as well, since you are the coach of Hogwarts Quidditch Little League teams.

The warding would best be done on Halloween. Despite the party and the ball for the older years, we should have no problems in beginning at midnight.

As to your invitation for Harry and I, it would be good to get away from the castle. We shall arrive on the afternoon of Saturday, December 15.

Sincerely,

S. Snape

Thursday, October 17, 1991

Hermione was at the little desk beside her bed in the corner of the Infirmary. It had been a pleasant day returning to her classes and all of her teachers, including the acidic Professor Snape, had welcomed her back. She was writing a letter to her sponsors – she wondered if there was a better name for the Malfoys – telling them a bit of her day.

Dear Aunt Cissy and Uncle Lucius,

Madame Pomfrey formally released me from the Infirmary today but I'm still going to be sleeping here until I get re-Sorted. I have a cosy little corner not far from the madame's office. There is a bed, which is comfortable, and I have a small desk where I can do my homework – best of all, though, is that Professor Snape has allowed Harry and Draco to spend their study time with me in the evening. They've been ever so nice in walking on either side of me wherever we go in the castle.

The prefects of Slytherin are being kind, too. There are some kids who aren't too happy about me continuing a friendship with Harry and Draco, but I think that's because you and your husband are my sponsors and so they aren't doing anything more than giving me odd looks and scowls.

Millicent Bulstrode visited after class today. She told me that since she doesn't have a dorm mate that she's asked Professor Snape if I could share her dorm if I get re-Sorted into Slytherin.

I'd really like to be in Slytherin. I don't know if I really have any Slytherin qualities, but the friends I do have are there and I would really like to be with them. Is it true that you can ask the Hat to put you in a certain House?

Something funny, but kind of nice happened between classes today...

Hermione was very happy to be back in her classes. She had all her notes from the boys and the homework she'd been given while she was in the Infirmary, was all finished and being handed in to each teacher.

Since there was about twenty minutes between classes, she, Draco, and Harry had decided to go to the main courtyard and rest. It was cold, but the wind was blowing today, so Hermione was able to practice her Warming Spell a bit more as she cast it upon herself and her friends.

"I bet Hagrid's harvesting the pumpkins today," noted Draco as he kept a weather eye upon the small groups of students gathered here and there throughout the courtyard.

"What are the pumpkins for?" asked Harry.

"Halloween!" declared Draco. "That's like the best holiday next to Christmas for a wizard. Don't Muggles celebrate Halloween?"

Hermione nodded, "They dress up in costumes and go Trick-or-Treating."

Draco frowned. Trick-or-Treating? Harry added, "I never got to go, but Dudley would always dress up and so did my aunt and uncle but they went to parties and they..." his voice faded at the recollection, which, as usual, wasn't a pleasant one. Uncle Vernon would always drink too much at those parties and he always wanted to take it out on Harry. His hand went subconsciously to his collarbone and he winced at an old, and healed injury.

Hermione scowled at Harry's motion with his hand, and so she asked a question to stop Harry's thoughts from drifting where they ought not to. "What do wizards do for Halloween, Draco?"

"Well, the kids always get a big party," he said, unwittingly imitating the stance of his Head of House, "and the elves do some of their best cooking. There's lot of sweets, and pasties, and biscuits and the adults just let us eat ourselves silly. The older kids get a Ball so they can dance with girls." Draco grimaced appropriately, as did Harry. Hermione sneered at them both and then huffed. Boys!

"Why's it an important holiday?" asked Harry.

"That's when the Veil is thin, right?" said Draco, as though the two Muggle-borns ought to know about the Veil. Two matched puzzled looks told him his assumption was in error and so he explained. "The Veil. That's what separates our world from the world of the Dead."

"But there are ghosts at Hogwarts," began Hermione. "wouldn't that mean that there is no Veil?"

Draco sighed in frustration. "Ghosts are different! Those are spirits that didn't go through the Veil because they either just didn't want to, or still had stuff to do from when they were living."

"Or, because they're being punished," added Harry. "Like the Bloody Baron."

Draco stared at him in astonishment. Hermione asked, "How do you know that, Harry?"

Harry shrugged. "I talked to him once or twice. He looks scary, but he's not real bad."

"He talked to you?" Draco whispered in awe. Harry nodded. "That's wicked! He doesn't talk much to anyone."

A twin chorus of greetings interrupted their discussion. Harry and Draco both turned menacing looks of warning upon the two third year Gryffindors, Fred and George Weasley.

"We wanted to apologise," Fred said without preamble as he and his brother gave Hermione their most solemn and serious expressions.

"We wanted you to know that not all Gryffindors are bad," explained George.



Fred added softly, "Or, all Weasleys."

Hermione's expression was tight, but she listened. Draco and Harry were each on one of her sides and both had their wands ready to draw, just in case.

"First of all," said Fred, "our little brother isn't a bad sort..."

"He just doesn't think," finished George.

"He can be a bit dim, sometimes," amended Fred.

"Ronn timers is a moron, basically," George said a bit more strongly. For a second the twins glared at each other, then Fred shrugged his shoulders.

"All right, he can be a right git because he just doesn't think," agreed Fred.

"Mum's asked us if she could send you a letter, Hermione," asked George.

Hermione started to shake her head no, but Fred interjected, "Mum's really nice and she didn't raise us to be anything but good kids."

"Well, except for Percy," said George, with a smirk. "But he's a ponce."

"A ponce isn't bad, just annoying," agreed Fred.

The twins were pleased that Hermione smiled, just a bit. "Anyway," continued Fred, "Mum probably wants to apologise for Ronn timers, and maybe send you some biscuits."

George grinned, "Mum's biscuits are really great!"

Hermione spoke softly, "She's not going to make me speak to your brother, is she?"

The twins shook their heads in unison. Fred then spoke up, "Mum's just real embarrassed, Hermione."

"Yeah," agreed George, with a slight smirk, "usually its us that embarrasses her, but we've never hurt anyone."

Fred moved a step closer to Hermione and was glad that her guards, Harry and Draco, didn't move against him. "Ron embarrassed our whole family, Hermione, and you can bet that mum's straightening him out and he'll never do it again."

"Okay," Hermione agreed with a slightly bigger smile. "Your mum can write to me."

"Great!" the twins both said. "Now," Fred clapped his hands together once. "We know you're going to get re-Sorted, Hermione, but wherever you go,"

"we just want you to know," continued George, "that we'll watch out for you, too."

Fred smiled. "No one from Gryffindor is ever going to hurt you." He then looked to Harry and Draco. "None of you."

Later, that afternoon at lunch, Fred and George went up to the staff table to speak to Professor Snape. He glanced to the Silver Trio and when Hermione gave him the barest hint of a nod, he then nodded to the twins who then went over to the Slytherin table and seated themselves across from Harry, Draco, and Hermione.

Fred and George seem to be sincere, but I suppose only time will tell.

Goodnight.

Sincerely,

Hermione

Friday, Oct. 18, 1991

The morning of the last day of the school week was always a good one; students looked forward to a weekend of play, or snogging, or slacking off on homework until the last minute. For the teachers, Friday was the day that would herald the grading of essays, exams,

and quizzes, a lot of tea (possibly laced with various spirits) and time away from noisy children.

The mail owls swooped into the Great Hall dropping envelopes, scrolls, and small packages to the recipients below.

The Daily Prophet plopped into Draco's scrambled eggs and he quickly wiped off the paper and then sat it between himself and Harry so they could both check the professional Quidditch scores. Hermione received an elegant cream envelope that smelled very lightly of lilac. She opened the letter from Narcissa Malfoy and began to read it.

Dear Hermione,

We are very pleased to hear that you are recovering well and have done a fine job in keeping up with your studies. Do write to us and let us know how your practicals are going.

You will be pleased to know that we received notification from the Board that you will be re-Sorted this Friday, October 18th at six o'clock. Lucius and I will be there as witnesses. Professors McGonagall and Snape will also be there. Harry and Draco are invited, if you wish. You ought to receive a memo about the re-Sorting some time today from the Headmaster to meet in his office.

I have sent your gown request to Madame Elianne and you need not be concerned about a colour. When I have you at the Manor for your fitting, then we will settle upon a colour that complements your skin tone and hair.

Affectionately,

Aunt Cissy

The Malfoy's great eagle owl, which had just dropped off a letter to Hermione, swooped up to the staff table and landed right beside Snape's plate where it held out its leg.

Snape, giving the bird a scowl, untied the scroll that was there, and then gave the large bird a piece of his bacon. The owl ate the bacon and with a great flutter of its wings, which disturbed Snape's black

hair, the bird took off. The Potions instructor ran his hand quickly through his hair and then opened the short note to read it.

Severus,

We'll speak after the re-Sorting.

Lucius

Albus Dumbledore was not entirely happy even though he had agreed to Miss Granger's re-Sorting. It had been his deputy, with his wishes, that had held up the Petition. One boy expelled, his future possibly ruined. The other two suspended. Perhaps their futures would not be ruined, but the suspensions and the assault were part of their permanent record and it was not magic the Headmaster could alter. Future, prospective employers would see the assault and would base their opinions of Mr. Weasley and Mr. Finnegan upon it. It saddened him and angered him that two boys, with such potential, would have that stain to follow them the rest of their lives. No matter if neither made another mistake again, they were branded.

And, Miss Granger? Dumbledore shook his head. She would be happy. Her grades would be impeccable, her future secure. No one would ever know of this time. The girl would be re-Sorted instead of facing her troubles in Gryffindor House and dealing with them. Perhaps, he thought a touch acidly, Miss Granger wasn't a Gryffindor, at all. The Headmaster almost spoke aloud, but the grim expression on his Head of Slytherin House's face had him checking his tongue.

Slytherins, Dumbledore's mind whispered, they always run away.

Snape was beginning to hate the old man. The damned Gryffindor couldn't keep his thoughts to himself and in front of a skilled Legilimens, it was akin to shouting what he was thinking. Of course, Albus Dumbledore never did anything without purpose and the elder man's pointed look towards the younger wizard showed very clearly his disapproval of the re-Sorting.

The younger man was just about to bite out a scathing remark, when of all people, it was Minerva who told the old man just where to put his vituperative thoughts.

"Get that look off your face, Albus," she firmly remonstrated. Dumbledore gave the older woman a sad look and she just scowled. "I will not see Miss Granger in the Infirmary again for my out of date beliefs so don't look at Severus as though he is to blame!"

"You mistake me, my dear," the Headmaster said gently.

This time Snape was able to detect the very slight change in the man's modulation that signaled the start of his Voice Magic. He interrupted sharply, "It is obvious you do not approve of the re-Sorting, Headmaster. As the Petition has been approved by the Board, there is nothing more to be done." Snape crossed his arms over his chest and tightened his grimace into stone.

Dumbledore sighed and shrugged and welcomed the knock that came at his office door. With a wave of his wand, the door swung open to admit the Malfoys along with their son, Harry Potter, and Hermione Granger.

"Narcissa, Lucius," welcomed the Headmaster. Other than a brief glance, neither adult Malfoy even nodded a polite acknowledgment. Dumbledore ignored the slight as he addressed the two students. "Mr. Potter and Mr. Malfoy, if you would take seats by your teachers?" The two boys moved to the chairs that were in front of their two professors.

When Harry slumped relaxingly into his chair, Snape (instinctively doing what parents had done for centuries) lightly touched the boy's spine to make him sit up straighter. Harry glanced over his shoulder at the same time he sat up, a question in his eyes. Snape merely nodded and shifted to straighten his own spine in example. His expression did not change, but there was a touch of warmth in the dark eyes and Harry sighed in satisfaction as he moved his gaze back to the center of the room.

Lucius ushered his wife to a chair and then lightly laid his hands upon Hermione's shoulders as he stood behind the girl. "We'd prefer getting this over with as quickly as possible, Dumbledore," said the eldest Malfoy, purposefully not using the Headmaster's title.

The Headmaster said nothing as he Summoned the Sorting Hat from its shelf high above his desk. When the Hat was in his hands,

he turned and faced Hermione. Dumbledore conjured a stool and then bade the young girl to sit upon it.

Hermione didn't hesitate as she clambered up onto the stool. She smiled at Draco and Harry, and then looked at the Headmaster. "I'm ready, sir."

Dumbledore dropped the Hat upon Hermione's head and she found herself in musty darkness.

"Well, well," drawled the Hat. "Is Gryffindor not to your taste?"

"No," Hermione replied a bit sharply.

"You have courage, though," the Hat mused a bit too smugly at its original Sorting. "Look at all you've been through, girl... oho! Is that what you think of me!" it laughed suddenly as it leapt back from Hermione's thoughts. "So! You'd burn me, if you could. My magic is much stronger than yours, child, and I can't be burnt."

"Someone's tried that before, then?" she asked, a touch of acid in her voice.

"Hmmm... I see... so you don't want me to do my job?" The Hat avoided Hermione's spoken question and listened, instead, to her thoughts.

"I think you might stick me in another House that wouldn't suit me," she countered, firmly.

"And you think I wouldn't Sort you into Slytherin?" the Hat asked again.

"I don't trust you," Hermione said stubbornly.

"Ohho! You do sound like a Slytherin, now, missy!" The Hat chuckled and Hermione glowered in the darkness. "Well, let us see what we have here..." the Hat mused as it hummed for a few seconds, clucked a non-existent tongue, and 'lalaled' an odd jingle. "Ambition, but ohhhh, wasn't that quite a bit muddled with your need to show everyone up... tamed that, I see. Still a hand-waver, but in a few years... Survival. Not so willing to go it alone, now, are you?" The Hat's condescending, overly knowledgeable tone was getting

on Hermione's nerves. "Flexibility... yes, very good and here it is! Cleverness, adept and adaptive... perfect... cunning... oh yes... very much so. Well, there is no other choice than, is there?"

Hermione held her breath and felt her heart thumping a bit too painfully in her chest. C'mon! She demanded in her thoughts. Which House?

The Hat chuckled, rather meanly, thought Hermione. "SLYTHERIN!" The Hat shouted, startling everyone in the office.

Hermione swept the stupid Hat from her head and ignored it as it fell to the floor while she slipped off the stool. She ran over to her friends and hugged them both. She then ran over and hugged Narcissa who smiled pleasantly and patted her back. Lucius was startled when the small girl rushed over and hugged him as well.

"Thank you, sir!" she exclaimed.

Lucius smiled and awkwardly patted her back. "You're welcome, child... uhm..." Draco, who knew his father wasn't good with public displays of affection (although he was trying to change that) jumped up and pulled Hermione back over to himself and Harry's places in front of Snape.

Minerva moved at that moment and glanced grimly down into the small girl's smile. "Good luck, Miss Granger." With that sentiment, she swept out of the office, ignoring the Headmaster as he called after her. Snape frowned, not entirely certain whether there had been a lash of sarcasm in the witch's sentiment.

Dumbledore picked up the ratty, old Sorting Hat, and brushed, somewhat ineffectually, at its felted exterior. He then sent it up to its high shelf with a wave of his wand. When he turned, he smiled at the jubilant young girl, a smile that lacked any true joy to it because there was no accompanying twinkle to his gaze.

"Well, that is that, then." His smile dimmed as though he were feeling his years. "Make a home in Slytherin, Miss Granger." Dumbledore then waved his hand to dismiss them all as he turned away.

Snape glared darkly at the old wizard before settling his attention on his newest Snake. "Come with me, Miss Granger, and I'll show you the way to the common room, and your dorm."

Lucius motioned to the two boys as his wife had moved to stand beside him. "Go along, gentlemen. We shall wait in the Entrance Hall for all of you."

"Are we going someplace, father?" asked Draco, just barely containing his hopeful exuberance.

Lucius smiled easily and touched his heir's head. "I think a congratulatory dinner is in order, don't you think?"

"Yes! Thank you, father!" Draco grasped Harry by the sleeve and they started to run out of the office.

"Be civilised!" snapped Snape to the two, sudden, hooligans. He smirked as he saw their footsteps slow until they were both out of sight down the spiral staircase. He then heard their footsteps clattering rapidly upon the stone floor, until they faded.

"Severus!" called Narcissa. "Will you join us?"

Snape glanced over his shoulder, "I would be honored, Narcissa."

Dinner had been a pleasant affair at a posh, Muggle restaurant in the heart of Muggle London. Hermione, who traveled often with her parents, was used to the busy cacophony that was Muggle London, but neither of the boys were. Draco had not been taken to a big Muggle city, having been sheltered mostly at Malfoy Manor, or his mother's villa in Spain. Harry had never been beyond Privet Drive, so he, like Draco, was dazzled by the lights and the noise.

Snape had Transfigured Harry's clothing into a neat pair of dark grey trousers, a white cotton shirt, and his robes became a matching jacket. He wasn't fond of the tie, but he really liked the knee length coat that his outer cloak had become. It was just like his father's coat.

Lucius wearing a fine, Edwardian suit of dark grey, needed only to transfigure his cloak into a beautiful coat of the softest, dark plum wool with a black fur collar and cuffs. He Transfigured his son's



clothing similarly, though the tie he Transfigured for his son was a smart, black bowtie of silk. Harry's tie was of green silk, but was a long tie. Narcissa's clothing was, like her husband's, also Muggle; a simple black gown of flowing charmeuse and a coat, also of deep plum that cinched in at her waist.

The Malfoy Matriarch had taken on the task of Transfiguring Hermione's school uniform so she was wearing a dress of green silk, with a lighter green ribbon around the waist, tied in the back and delicate embroidery of flowers and bees around the collar. The dress dropped to her knees and her sensible school shoes were now black patent leather flats. Her outer cloak was of soft, dove grey with a white fur collar, and a white muff of fur to keep her hands warm.

The three adults and three children were the perfect picture of Winter, upper class charm and they were treated as such in the restaurant.

Draco tried to interest Harry in shrimp cocktail, but Harry grimaced at the little pale things that looked like fish tails in tomato sauce. Snape smirked and suggested that Harry might like the buttered artichoke hearts. He gave his father a dubious look, as those sounded weird, but once he tasted them, he loved them.

Draco and his father had lobster for dinner, but Narcissa had snow crab legs for her main course. Hermione had lemon chicken with Caesar salad that she thought was the most wonderful chicken she'd ever had.

Harry, again, was feeling a bit put out by all the fancy dishes on the menu and so he gave in when his father ordered a filet mignon for him, which he enjoyed immensely.

Snape, not fond at all of fish, chose for himself a simple steak that was small portioned with lots of mixed vegetables on the side. Harry, remembering at the last minute how his father was about vegetables, ate some that were on his plate, just in case not doing so might deny him dessert.

The dessert was, of course, the most anticipated course by the children. Even Hermione, who usually stayed away from sugary things at Hogwarts, indulged in a pretty meringue of blue that looked

like sea foam over a light sponge cake. Harry went straight for the chocolate and indulged in a large piece of cake called Chocolate Heaven. Draco decided on his favorite, which was tiramisu. The adults, wisely, kept to coffee or liqueur.

Once back at Hogwarts, the children went to the Slytherin common room where Draco, Harry, and Hermione, joined Pansy Parkinson, Millicent Bulstrode, Teddy Nott, and Blaise Zabini for their study group. The Malfoys went to the visitor quarters where Narcissa sat down with a novel while her husband went to speak with the Potions Master.

In the Slytherin common room, the table by one of the tall windows that looked out over the Mer City under the Black Lake, was seeing very little studying. Pansy was glaring at Hermione over her Transfiguration textbook. Although Pansy's father had been a financial supporter of You-Know-Who, she did not hold onto the Pureblood prejudices against Muggles and Muggle-borns. She just simply saw Hermione as another rival for Draco's affections. She'd been able to ignore the girl in the Great Hall at meals, to a certain degree, but now Hermione was a Snake and Pansy wasn't too happy about that.

Millicent Bulstrode ignored Pansy; pretty much like she did all the time. She'd taken the seat next to her dorm mate and she was doing what the others were doing which was to 'reveal the secrets' of Slytherin House.

"Even if someone doesn't like you, Professor Snape says they're not allowed to show it outside of the common room," said Millicent.

Hermione grinned. For once, she'd lost count of all the guidelines and rules. Harry had promised to help her with them later since he'd written most of them down.

"Just don't forget the rules that are posted by the door, Hermione," said Harry pointing to the framed list of elegantly scripted rules."

"Those are The Laws," interjected Teddy. "Slytherin House is our family and we learn that not all families are perfect."

"Like Marcus Flint!" spat Draco. Everyone nodded their agreement, including Pansy.

Marcus Flint had a foul mouth that just wouldn't quit. He also couldn't keep it shut outside of the common room and every time he was caught saying something against any of his fellows, he lost points. Once, so far, he got detention. Vincent Crabbe and Gregory Goyle, who saw the captain of the Quidditch team as a hero, were at least smart enough to keep their insults for the common room.

Snape opened the door of his private quarters within the dungeons to Lucius. The older man gave him a grim smile, then walked in and went over to the narrow sideboard where the younger man kept his firewhiskey and brandy. He poured two crystal tumblers of the firewhiskey and handed one to Snape.

"I am not heartened by your behavior," Snape spoke with misgiving. He watched as Lucius sat down in one of the two wingback chairs by the fireplace before taking his own, well-worn and favoured chair.

Lucius regarded his firewhiskey before taking a swallow of it. He then held the tumbler in one hand, and swirled the amber contents almost hypnotically.

"I had to do a bit of research... well, more research. Lily was exceedingly talented in Charms, was she not?" asked the older wizard.

"Very," agreed Snape. "She had the creativity to experiment with Charms and did rather well in creating some of her own spells." He sighed a bit heavily. "I think Lily would have gone into Charms Research if it hadn't been for the war."

For a moment both men were silent and then Lucius spoke up, "I had an investigator go to Godric's Hollow." He shook his head in slight disgust. "It is a terrible monument to the memory of the Potters. A point in Time that is unnaturally frozen. Nothing is out of place there."

Snape nodded, inwardly tamping down the bile that rose up from his stomach as he recalled the time that he'd been taken to the half-destroyed home that James and Lily had lived in, should have been safe in. It was a haunted place, but not by ghosts, by memories of bittersweet happiness and tragic death. Snape had no desire to ever return, and had even pleaded with Dumbledore to burn the place to

the ground. Instead, without explanation as usual, the old fool had turned it into a grim museum. A hideous monument that preserved every piece of splintered wood, broken brick, and burn marks from spells gone awry.

Lucius finished his explanation, "My investigator found nearly a dozen books that Lily had scribbled notes in." From an inner pocket he pulled a shrunken book that he returned to normal size. He then floated it over to Snape.

The book was large and required two hands for Snape to hold onto. He didn't open it right away, even though the title intrigued him: The Arcane Protective Magic of Motherhood. He was a little uneasy at seeing the precise printing that Lily had habitually used in place of cursive writing.

"That's the key," said Lucius. "Lily's annotations are heavy, throughout, but what you'll want to see is about midway through the book. She used turquoise ink in that area only."

Bracing himself, Snape opened the book. Lucius had been right. Her handwritten notes were in the margins, tightly scribbled between lines, or when her note taking had been too much, she attached a piece of parchment and wrote on that.

He recalled how, once they'd both gotten to Hogwarts, he had stared in dismay at her terrible habit of marking up her textbooks with endless notes. Within just a few weeks her textbooks looked like they'd been tossed down the Moving Staircases. In a fit of pique, Snape had taken all of her books and showed her a spell that transferred all of unorganised notes into a journal. Lily's note taking continued, but at least she emptied her books of the messiness at the end of the day.

Snape smirked softly, seeing that Lily's habit had been stubborn and stayed, but he did wonder why she had not copied out the notes. The book was in good shape, it just looked the worse for wear with all the extra pieces of parchment sticking out here and there, pages with bent corners, and of course, notes in nearly every colour of ink possible.

He soon found the section inked in turquoise and allowed his eyes to scan the notes briefly. The text itself dealt with the legend of a

Mother's Magic protecting her young from evil. Every witch and wizard knew that a witch's power increased once she gave birth. Her magic would be erratic during pregnancy, but would even out as the pregnancy gestated. Once the witch gave birth to her child, her magic could be measurably increased and a bond from cellular to magical core was set in the blood. This text elaborated upon what had long since been accepted as legend that a Mother could extend her power to her child in times of crisis to protect the child.

Lily's notes examined what spells could be used to actually make this transfer happen, in the form of a kind of shield that would reverse spells aimed at the child. Her notes also mentioned Occlumency and Legilimens. Drawn in by these Mental Arts, he studied her notes further.

While Snape continued to read, Lucius refreshed their drinks. The younger man seemed unaware of his empty tumbler being refilled, nor did he notice that Lucius had stood at one point, then returned to his chair.

"Spirit Magic?" Snape gasped.

Lucius smiled thinly. "You found the key."

"Lily bound herself to Harry?" he asked incredulously. "The scar – is it a Veil?"

"Not quite," amended Lucius. "At least, not from what I found. Lily created a conduit between herself and her son so that if he needed her, he could call upon her. I think it is more... hm... fluid than a Veil."

"In his dreams," mused Snape in understanding.

"For a child that would be the easiest way," agreed Lucius. "That may have been why Lily and James appeared for the adoption. Do you know if Harry ever... called upon his mother?"

Closing the book, Snape Summoned something from his bedroom. Lucius watched as a parchment envelope sailed into the living room. Snape then opened it and took out the fragile drawings that he'd taken from Harry's cupboard when he rescued the boy. He handed them over to his friend.

"He drew these from dreams he's had since he was a toddler," Snape explained.

Lucius' eyes swept over the nearly perfect depictions of Hogwarts, Hagrid's Hut, the Forbidden Forest, children flying on brooms, and the curious figure of the Headmaster dancing an odd, little jig. The last drawing was the one in which Harry had drawn himself, the Dark Man of his dreams, and the frightening visage of Voldemort.

"Harry dreamt of you?" Lucius marveled.

Snape nodded. "He called me the 'Dark Man'." Lucius gave a snort at that and his friend glowered. "When I found him, he asked me why I hadn't come sooner," Snape's voice was taut, hard, and tinged sharply with regret. "I won't ever fail him again which is why I must understand what's going on with his scar."

Lucius Summoned Lily's book and tapped its cover. "Knowing what she did explains Harry's visions. We may never know exactly what happened when Voldemort cast the Killing Curse upon young Harry, nor just how he was saved from it. What I believe did happen was that Lily cast her spell the moment that the Dark Lord cast his. Inadvertently, the spell may have opened the conduit to them both." Lucius held out the drawing of Snape destroying Voldemort. "Harry must have had dreams of him," he touched the figure of the Dark Lord, "as well as the others."

"And, now that Voldemort is within this castle, Harry's picking up visions from him as he grows stronger," muttered Snape.

Lucius glowered softly and stared for a moment into the depths of his firewhiskey. "Why is that old wizard doing nothing to discover where Voldemort is hiding?"

"He has done," Snape spat. "In his secretive, manipulative way he brought the damned Philosopher's Stone into the school and had us dunderheaded adults build an obstacle course of puzzles to hide it."

"That's it?" Lucius asked querulously.

Snape's fingers drummed angrily upon the arm of his chair. "I suspect that he intends for Harry to go after Voldemort," he paused

a moment as he scowled at the flames in the fireplace. With cobra-like viciousness that surprised Lucius, he threw the tumbler and its remains of firewhiskey into the flames. The flames roared, eating at the alcohol upon the glittering shards of crystal. "Unless, of course, Harry IS the Dark Lord."

Lucius waved his wand to regather the pieces of broken glass and to repair them. When the tumbler was repaired, he summoned it and examined it. He then sent it to the sideboard, deciding for his friend that he'd had enough liquor.

"Harry most certainly is not the Dark Lord, or else the Cruor mea cruor would have failed. Dangerously, no doubt." Snape swallowed bile at that thought, giving his friend a dark and sour glance. "There is something to worry about, though," Lucius spoke carefully. He was very aware of his friend's anger, and did not wish to tip it into a place where he couldn't control it. Snape, though, had much more control than the elder Malfoy expected, and he calmed himself as he listened to Lucius. "The nightmares. Especially that last one. I am concerned that it may be entirely possible for Voldemort to possess Harry."

Snape grimaced in understanding. "He must already possess someone, but his strength must be uncertain. Hence, the deaths of the unicorns and the two Centaurs."

"Have you any suspicion who he might be using?" asked Lucius.

"Quirrell," Snape put forth without hesitation. Lucius gave him a questioning glance. "As he is new and not part of the rest of the staff, that alone would make me suspect him. However, Harry, from what I am told by Hermione and Draco, gets migraines in his class and he had a terrible fit in class that triggered one of the visions. This was the first class he attended for Defence Against the Dark Arts."

Snape turned away from the flames. "I have been watching him." The Potions Master then revealed that he had suspected the DADA professor for several weeks of a duplicitous nature. "I am by no means certain, but he could very well be a host."

Lucius frowned pensively. "If Quirrell is playing host to the spirit of Voldemort, then he's dying."

Snape nodded. "And we know of no way to destroy a spirit."

"We shall discover a way, Severus," assured Lucius strongly.

"And I will keep my son safe from the Headmaster." His voice was grim and his promise implacable.

Saturday, Oct. 19, 1991

A cold wind blew outside this morning and Snape, as he walked to the Slytherin common room, allowed his thoughts to faintly hope for snow. Until then, though, today promised to keep most of the students inside, except for that afternoon when Lucius, his captains, and the players of the Hogwarts little league would be practicing. This cold morning belonged to Snape and Harry for they had business in Diagon Alley.

Snape walked into the common room and found it warm and populated with about a quarter of the Slytherin students. Some were studying or doing homework, but others were playing various games, or watching the Mer folk in the Black Lake playing Dodge with the Giant Squid.

"I'm ready, sir!" Harry was one of those watching the game under the lake. Draco was nowhere to be seen as he was probably visiting with his parents. Hermione had her nose in a book and was oblivious to her new Head of House's arrival.

"Where is your scarf, Mr. Potter?" Snape asked as he made sure the boy had dressed warmly for the chilling wind outside.

Harry glanced down at his mittens, his boots, and coat, and then quickly felt his head for his hat. It was there, but the scarf was missing. "I'll be right back!" Harry sprinted back up to his dorm.

In that space of time, Snape walked over to his newest Snake and waited for her to realise that he was standing before her. With a slight blush, she looked up from her book.

"What are you reading, Miss Granger?" he asked nonchalantly.

"The Illustrious History of Slytherin House," she smiled.



Snape smirked gently and nodded. "A very good book, Miss Granger. I would like to see you at today's little league practice." She curled her arms around the book, worried that he might take it away as he done to her book when she had been sitting on the steps to the Entrance Hall some weeks back. He gave the girl a quirk of a smile. "Read now, Miss Granger. Later, fresh air, and a bit of a walk with your friends would be efficacious."

"Yes, sir," she agreed.

"I'm ready! For sure this time, sir!" Harry had run swiftly, but also nearly silently down the stairs and so he startled his father with his sudden arrival. Ever the spy, Snape did not show this, and ushered his son from the common room. "Bye, Hermione!" He waved at his friend over his shoulder. She grinned and waved back.

Griphook met Severus Snape and his heir in the foyer of Gringotts. With a grunt he led them back to his office. With a slight motion of his long fingers, he bade father and son to sit while he moved to the other side of his desk and Summoned a set of papers.

Bluntly, he began, "Master Snape, we are aware of the Cruor mea cruor and understand the reasons for its confidentiality. So, for your convenience we have sealed the Potter vault and require the key until such time as you deem it safe to reveal the adoption."

Snape removed the key to the Potter vault from his inner pocket. He held the small, gold key, not immediately releasing it as the goblin banker gripped it. "Will the contents be kept in trust for Mr. Potter?"

Griphook sneered and glanced sharply at the young boy. "Mr. Snape will have no need to worry." With a curt nod, Snape released the key and the goblin vanished it. He rubbed his hands together and grinned, a still not pleasant sight. "Very good, then. Now to business in regards to your heir, Master Snape."

For the next hour there were papers signed and a vault for Harry James Snape was set up, which Snape explained would be for his allowance, and then later for any earnings he made after his majority. Harry wasn't too concerned, yet, about the future. He was excited about getting an allowance.

"How much will I get?" he asked, interrupting something Griphook had just said about his new vault.

Snape frowned in disapproval at the interruption and Harry sighed in silent apology.

Griphook finally produced a key for Harry's new vault. He then escorted his clients from his office and to the foyer. Before turning away, the short goblin peered piercingly up into Snape's eyes. "Master Snape, it would be wise for all concerned to address your son properly from now on." The goblin then stared rather pointedly at Harry.

For a moment, Snape wondered at that piece of advice, but as he turned to look down upon his son, he noticed that Harry had changed. Not monumentally, but subtly. His cheekbones were not as soft, but more defined, and the boy's hair, which he hadn't seen before beneath the hat, wasn't messy. There was a touch of curl to the ends, but it was almost smooth, and black.

The changes were enough that if Harry were sitting just with friends, others might get the odd feeling of familiarity about the boy's looks, but not really be able to define the sensation. However, if he were standing next to the Potions Master, it might take a few seconds, but those that knew them both would have no problem identifying Snape within the boy.

Snape, who had never even dared to imagine himself with a son, found himself a bit breathless at seeing a part of himself in his son. He recalled something that Lucius had once said to him, not long after his own son was born.

"Immortality is a fool's quest for our Dark Lord, Severus. He will never know true immortality as long as he remains ignorant as to what a treasure it is to see your own immortality in your child."

"Harry James Snape," the elder Snape tested. "What do you think, Harry?"

Harry had been signing that very signature for the last hour, but hearing it gave him that warm, fuzzy feeling he was really starting to like. He grinned, "Is that me, now, sir?"

"It is. After all, you are my son, are you not?" Snape gave the boy a conciliatory smirk.

In reply, Harry slipped his small hand into that of his father's much larger, calloused, and potion-stained hand. Noticing his own warm, fuzzy feeling deep in his heart, Snape escorted his son from Gringotts.

Outside the bank, Snape cast a Tempus Charm and noted the time. "Well, we have a few hours before we need to head back to Hogwarts. Is there anyplace you wish to visit, Harry?"

"The Quidditch store?" asked Harry hopefully.

With a nod, Snape led his son up the street to Quality Quidditch Supplies. The store was teeming with youngsters and parents who were already tired out from having to deal with their progeny. Harry didn't break away from Snape, but only held his father's hand tighter. The boy did not care for crowds and although he was used to the noise and bustle of Hogwarts, at least there, most of the students were familiar, even if it were by their faces alone and not their names. Here, in the Quidditch store, everyone was a stranger, and Snape knew that meant to Harry that they were all potential threats.

Despite Harry's caution and timidity, his delight in the store itself and its dizzying array of brooms, polishing kits, equipment, toys, games, and even Quidditch themed sweets, was noticeable. Snape liked seeing the little boy's happiness and could almost ignore the noise and crush of unruly children and adults.

Harry darted like a bumble bee from one display to the next, his eyes wide, his mouth open in a frozen 'O' of awe. For awhile he stood with several other boys as they ogled the newest model of Quidditch broom, the Nimbus 2000. Just like the other boys he stretched out his hand to touch the mahogany wood of the handle, but a modified Shield Spell protected the display broom from questing hands.

The spell almost didn't deter Harry, as the other boys continued to ooh and aah and extoll the virtues of the new broom, and those brooms that had been. A slight, musical chirp, almost unheard by most in the store, was caught by Harry. Keen hearing was natural to Harry; it was another skill he'd had to develop in the Dursley

household. He could, sometimes, avoid the worst of his family's ire by listening in on their conversations and arguments. So often his aunt and uncle thought their whispers or hisses were beneath his hearing, but Harry had heard, and once in awhile, it was to his benefit.

Harry stepped away from the Nimbus 2000 display and sought out the little chirping noise. It was like the soft chime of a tiny bell and it rather charmed him. Finally, near the back of the store where the counter stood, there was a cage of green patina, filigreed copper. Within the cage flitted the tiniest bird Harry had ever seen.

It was round of body with tiny feathers of soft gold and yellow; the edges gleamed like warm gold in the meagre light of the shop. The bird's beak was pale cream as were its almost unseen feet and legs, which were dusted by very light yellow feathers.

The tiny bird saw Harry, whose nose was against the edge of the counter, and his fingers upon it, and flitted happily closer. The little boy could now see that its eyes were a beautiful, bejeweled red. It chirped, chimed really, a sweet little song that Harry felt was making not just his lips smile, but everywhere inside him.

"Like 'im, do ya?" asked a gruff voice that startled Harry and he stepped hastily away from the counter. He backed into something solid and his heart beat rapidly for a few seconds until familiar, large hands with slim fingers, rested on his shoulders.

"He's tiny," Harry whispered as he looked up at the beefy man with impossibly curly, black hair, and dark cocoa coloured skin. "Wh-what kind of bird is it?"

Snape noted that although the very large shopkeeper unnerved Harry, he found a reserve of courage, with his father standing behind him, that allowed him to safely address the man. The Potions Master gave the boy's shoulder a gentle squeeze and he felt his son's body leaned back against him a little more securely.

"This..." said the large man as he put his hand through a narrow door into the cage. "Is a Snidget." The bird hopped trustingly onto his palm and he brought the bird out and down to Harry's level where he could see it.

"Snidgets are a protected species, are they not?" Snape asked the shopkeeper with a touch of curiosity.

"They are," he said without looking up, his brown eyes watching Harry watch the bird. "My brother owns a preserve in Africa. Little Timle here was a runt and got kicked out of his nest. Aldo gave me Timle, said if'n I could keep 'im alive, I could keep 'im."

Harry let out a startled giggle as Timle the Snidget hopped from his master's hand onto his head. Its little feet grasped his hair and peered upside-down into his face, chirping as though laughing.

The tall shopkeeper rose to his full height, then stuck out his hand to Snape, "Reyes Michaels. Fine boy you have there, sir," he nodded at Harry who now held the small Snidget on his hand. "Timle don't take to ever'one."

Snape took the man's hand into his and shook. "Severus Snape. My son, Harry."

Harry glanced up when he heard his name. "Hi." He giggled again as the little bird nipped his thumb and chirped laughingly again.

A wash of pride drifted through Snape's bones and he realised his hand had stroked gently down his son's hair. Behind him were boys and girls all yammering, making noise at each other, or begging their parents for brooms, or Bludgers, or Quaffles, or even the sweets. In front of him was a gentle little boy, who played contently with a tiny Snidget. No begging, no whinging, not at all an annoyance.

A few minutes later, Snape and Harry left the Quidditch supply store. Harry was chattering on delightedly about the Snidget and how it laughed at him and made him all 'smiley'.

"How come they're pertected, sir?" Harry interrupted his chatter to ask.

"Protected," Snape corrected. "When Quidditch was first played, the Golden Snidget wasn't a pretty, winged ball. They used live birds in the games."

"Did they live?" Harry asked worriedly.

Snape shook his head. "I'm afraid they didn't." Harry let out a sad sigh. "Quidditch was very hard for the poor birds and they were nearly hunted to extinction. The Snidget is now one of several magical creatures that are protected."

"I'm glad," Harry nodded. "Tim's happy and he made me feel happy. Something like that needs to be kept safe," the child concluded.

Snape chuckled softly, and smiled down at the boy that walked beside him. My son, his mind whispered. "I quite agree, Harry."

Wednesday, Oct. 23, 1991

Snape was at breakfast in the Great Hall eating a small meal of toast, with marmalade, pieces of fruit, and coffee. He was thinking of the weekend recently left behind and the week that had passed so far.

The new Quidditch little league teams had been re-organised into two teams (with the same names) but with five players on each team. There was a Seeker, two Chasers instead of three, and one Beater, and one Keeper. There had been a bit of a row over who would be the Seeker for the Growling Pixies. The best Seekers, by far, were Harry and Draco, but Draco didn't want to play opposite Harry. For some odd reason, it brought the two hot-headed Snakes to fisticuffs (this time Harry did rather decently in fighting back) and their fight nearly had Lucius quitting entirely and disbanding the entire little league.

Lucius might have infinite patience for his own offspring, but the other children, who decided to join in on the fight after two minutes, had been a bit much for him. With the help of his captains, though, the melee had been broken up and everyone had been sent to the Infirmary, including Lucius who had sported the bruising of a black eye for several hours.

The two fathers had each appropriately reprimanded, and threatened their sons (Lucius threatened Draco with a visit to his mad Aunt Bellatrix in Azkaban, and Snape had threatened Harry with a gruesome description of little boys ears and Hearing Potion). The two fighters then had to spend an hour contemplating two corners in Snape's office.

By that evening, it was decided that Draco would be the new Seeker for the Growling Pixies and a new game was scheduled for the following Saturday.

The rest of the week went well enough. Quirrell, it seemed, was under the weather on Sunday. He had refused, through his door, the help of Madame Pomfrey, and it was the Headmaster who told everyone to leave the poor man alone.

Snape was suspicious of the stuttering wizard's illness but he knew not approach Dumbledore with his misgivings since the old goat generally waved them off. He had written to Lucius who merely sent him a list of reading material, most of which was illegal. However, Snape had a feeling that to destroy a possessing spirit would require magic not used in centuries, and that was possibly Dark.

Quirrell, looking rather subdued, and possibly ashamed, had appeared that Wednesday morning at breakfast. He'd apologised, publicly no less, profusely and nauseatingly. Snape was quite glad when the stuttering man shut up and sat himself down to breakfast. That he was on the far opposite end of the table to Snape meant that he was able to completely forget about the man.

Taking a sip of his coffee, Snape glanced toward the Slytherin table to where Hermione sat with her two best friends, and her newest friend, and dorm mate, Millicent Bulstrode.

Hermione had settled in well to Slytherin and although there were a few who opposed having a Muggle-born in their House, a private lecture from their Head of House either set their mind at ease, or reminded them that Miss Granger had some very powerful friends.

He noticed the two Gryffindor twins, Fred and George Weasley, leaving their table and moving to sit at the Slytherin table. Like clockwork for the last several mornings, it was almost a small, coordinated ballet that began with them. Once the twins had moved to their new places at breakfast, three Ravenclaw students rose from their table and moved, one to Hufflepuff, and the other two to Gryffindor. Almost to the second when they were seated, a Slytherin moved to Ravenclaw, exchanging his place with another Hufflepuff that went to Slytherin. The last shifting was a Gryffindor seventh

year who had begun dating a Ravenclaw boy in seventh year, and she went to sit beside him.

This quaint dance only happened at breakfast since the Headmaster had made an announcement yesterday that the students had to remain at their House tables for lunch and dinner. Minerva had snorted at the ruling, as had Snape. Neither saw the sense in it, and both thought it better to allow the students to mingle. They certainly weren't hurting anyone and it had been quite civil.

But when did the Headmaster ever explain what he did, Snape asked himself silently. Never.

Turning to Minerva just on his left side, she seemed a bit healthier looking. Hogwarts was currently without a Deputy as Minerva's resignation had taken effect last Friday. Snape rather meanly hoped that the Headmaster was currently drowning in paperwork from her old job. Just as he thought that, a weary looking Albus Dumbledore left breakfast early, as he had the last two days, and disappeared through the narrow door behind the staff table that led to the staff room. Snape suspected that the upcoming hearing before the Hogwarts Board of Governors was much on his mind.

It seemed that the day might be uneventful, but no one should have thought that benign thought before the arrival of the mail. The Great Hall became noticeably quiet, but for whispers, and finger pointing and looks that jumped between Harry and the Potions professor. Snape did not look up as he was reading a small notation in The Daily Prophet. It was on the third page beneath a small heading that read: Wizarding Childrens Services. Just a few short lines down was the following: Snape, Severus T., confirmed via Familia Testimonium and Cruor Argumentum, biological father of Potter, Harry James, now Snape, Harry James. Young Mr. Snape is now the legal heir to the Snape and Prince estates.

"Wow!" Draco enthused to his friend. "I didn't know you took Professor Snape's last name!"

Harry grinned up towards the staff table at his father.

Snape saw his son's look and lifted his coffee mug in salute to his child, and gave him a small smile that lifted one corner of his mouth. He then silently thanked Lucius for putting a muzzle on Rita Skeeter,



who would have blown the little announcement into a full blown... expose'.

It was that time of the evening for Hogwarts that all the students were in bed, fast asleep, and the teachers that were awake were either grading, or reading, or enjoying, as Snape was, this quiet and solitary time of the day. His rounds had been made, points taken from the hormonal teenagers, and those out after curfew, and now he was home.

In his hand was a brandy snifter that held a small measure of brandy. In his other hand was the current Potions Weekly periodical. Not one of the best Potions periodicals, but it did have the weekly article by the respected Potions Master, Johannes Bitumen of Germany. This week's article had to do with newly discovered uses of Dittany and Master Bitumen's opinion on the uses.

So immersed was Snape in the silence, and the calm of reading, that when the house elf popped in, Snape's hand almost, but not quite, had snapped the bowl of his brandy snifter. Before he had a chance to rebuke the little flibbertigibbit, it clapped and exuberantly cried out, "It's snowing, Master Snape! Master Hagrid is telling Pips he is to be waiting for Master Snape, sir!"

Snape put his snifter down hastily, put on his teaching robes, and Summoned his gloves and outer cloak. "Tell Hagrid to give me about twenty minutes and I'll be there!"

The house elf, Pips, popped out of the Potions Master's living room, and Snape strode briskly from his quarters to the Slytherin common room.

Harry was having a nice dream. He and his father were walking along the beach. Although Snape had his robes on, he was barefoot, and holding Harry's hand as they walked. Fang was bouncing ahead of them as Harry threw a stick for the large boarhound to chase.

But then, the waves rose up, and Harry felt the entire earth rocking gently beneath his feet.

Blearily, Harry blinked his eyes as he left behind the silly dream world of the beach to peer up into the dark, dark, deeply dark brown

eyes of his father. It was Snape who was gently shaking Harry awake.

"It's snowing, Harry," Snape said softly, his smirk gentled into a kind of expectant smile.

Harry sat up. "Snow?" He rubbed the sleep from his eyes. "Do we get to see the Snowbells now?"

"Yes, we do. Prefect Anglaise is waking Miss Granger to join us, so get yourself dressed while I awaken Mr. Malfoy," directed Snape.

Harry scrambled from his bed and went to his wardrobe where he picked out socks, trousers, a shirt, a jumper, and began getting dressed. By the time he was pulling his head through his knit jumper, Draco was up and dressing himself as well. Harry's father seemed to have vanished.

"Profeffor Snaf's down..." Draco stopped speaking as he struggled more with his jumper. He spun around twice as he yanked on the hem and suddenly his head popped through the neckhole. "Common room," he finished as he ran his fingers through his straight and tousled hair. Draco then plopped himself on the edge of his bed and pulled on his boots.

"Ready?" asked Harry.

"Yeah," said Draco as he grabbed his outer cloak and threw it on.

Draco and Harry were quiet, mostly, as they made their way down the stairs to the common room where they found Hermione, trying to suppress a yawn, and Professor Snape.

"Let us hurry," Snape spoke quietly as he ushered the three first years out through Salazar's portrait and through the dim corridors of the dungeons.

"Ere, Perfessor Snape!" Hagrid gave a call and Fang barked once.

The children ran over to the half-giant. Fang circled them and licked the nearest child, that was Soapy (Draco), who gagged appropriately, but then hugged the large dog's head. Fang then bound over to Hermione, whom he had yet to meet. She smelled a

lot like Flowers, but she didn't squeal at him like most girls did. She actually scratched him behind the ears and he had to drop on his backside as one leg reacted to the scratching. He liked this girl and immediately dubbed her as 'Ear Scratch'. Fang butted Hermione happily in the abdomen and she laughed at the attention.

"Proper light's what we'll need," said the Keeper of the Grounds as he gave Harry and Draco each a lantern to carry. Another lantern was given to Hermione. Hagrid carried the last one and led them into the Forbidden Forest. Snape had used Lumos to light the tip of his wand.

As the small party walked, the snowflakes fell like thick pieces of slightly wet cotton onto the ground. The ground was being covered quickly and soon the party of 'snowbell' hunters found themselves walking upon a soft, cold carpet of snow.

Snape and Hagrid were very aware of their surroundings and that danger could be close by. The two adults flanked the children and their sharp eyes looked beyond the glow of light and into the shadows. After about fifteen minutes of walking, they reached a clearing in which the cold, pale moon shone down brightly upon them. Snape knelt in the snow, his black cloak billowing out behind him. The Silver Trio nudged each other at the sight their professor made in the snow and Hermione smiled, her eyes twinkling in delight. Draco snickered and Harry gave his friend a second nudge in the ribs.

"Pay attention," Snape was aware of their little antics and had them come and kneel beside him. He nodded when he heard Hermione cast a Warming Charm on all of them.

Snape very carefully cleared a small portion of the snow. Beneath it were several very green, fragile looking, stalks. Each stalk ended in a drop that was as white as the snow. "Watch," he whispered.

The children watched as the snow continued to fall, but the green stalks unfurled, as if they were yawning and waking up. The drops, as they were struck by the moonlight, spun on the end of the stalks lazily and then began to blossom. The soft white petals, four of them, unwrapped themselves, opened, and soon a tiny bell hung on the end of a gently curved, green stalk.

Snape then drew from an inner pocket four baskets that he Engorged to full size. Within each basket was a small set of solid gold scissors. He handed each of the children a basket and then took the small scissors from his basket.

"What you are looking for is just behind the blossom," he pointed at a nodule that connected blossom to stalk. "You need to cut directly across this nodule. If you cut the blossom, or the stalk itself, the blossom will wilt and die. Cutting across the nodule keeps the blossom full." Snape demonstrated, and with agility, he snipped the scissors right across the nodule. As he did so, seeds were released along with a mist that glimmered like a sparkling blue sapphire in the moonlight that delivered a scent of lavender and vanilla. The children sighed, ooohing over the luscious aroma.

Inwardly Snape smiled deeply. He would not have thought of sharing this experience before, with anyone. Many ingredients for potions that one harvested had such magical properties and the snowbells, in his mind, were one of the most beautiful. He felt more than just satisfaction at sharing this experience with his son, he felt pleasure in it. It was a secret, shared with Harry's friends, but something they would each, possibly, pass onto their children and thus preserving what, for him, made brewing potions truly magical.

Snape looked forward to many more years of being able to share such experiences with his son.

The Potions professor could teach the basics of Potions in class, but he was never able to pass on what drew him to Potions in the first place. There was the absolute wonder of the ingredients and how they were activated, or preserved, or prepared. There was the beauty of gathering many ingredients that his students took for granted. Of course, not all of brewing was a thing of beauty. There was Bubotuber Pus, frog's livers, Nettle Sap, chicken lungs – none of that was pleasant to harvest, or to prepare, but he had learned, that even in the most unpleasant of things, there was a magic, a beauty to be found that even he, the most skilled Potions Master of this century, could not pass onto his students. He, unfortunately, did not have the time for such subtlety, and to be painfully honest, Potions was the least appreciated course taught at Hogwarts.

This magic, this wonder, was something Snape desired to pass onto Harry. With Harry, he would have the one-on-one ability to show and

to share the more obscure aspects of Potions making that he generally didn't have time to show in the class.

"You may go and look for snowbells, now, but stay within this clearing," Snape spoke sternly, warning that to wander beyond would earn stiff consequences.

He watched Harry, Draco, and Hermione for a moment as they each found spots and began to clear the snow and work. Snape then looked beyond the clearing and was comforted by Hagrid at the opposite side of the clearing, also keeping an eye out for possible dangers.

'There's evil in the forest,' came Hagrid's voice when Snape last spoke to the Keeper. For a moment, Snape ignored the snowbells that he'd uncovered that were beginning to wilt, since they did not bloom for long. His eyes darted warily to the shadows between the trees that surrounded him and then he checked each of the children; his gaze lingering upon Harry. All of them were within the clearing, within the light.

Later, Snape would regret that he had not thought to ward the harvesting area.

Harry had been sleepy, at first, when his father woke him just a few minutes past midnight, but he'd wakened soon enough. He was going to get to go on a very neat, late night adventure with his father, and his friends. He'd also get to see a bit of what the Forbidden Forest was like. Everyone was curious about it because they'd heard about all sorts of magical creatures that dwelt in the woods.

In anticipation for this adventure, Harry, Draco, and Hermione all hoped to see different creatures. Hermione wanted to see a unicorn, Draco was sure there might be a dragon in the forest, and Harry really wanted to see a Centaur.

Harvesting the snowbells was a lot more fun than Harry thought it would be. It was neat uncovering the little, thin, green stalks with the closed teardrop on the end. You had to brush aside the snow, almost like an archaeologist that dug up bones. Harry was pretending that his snowbells were very valuable jewels that he would present to the famed court wizard that worked for the king.

His imagination, very well developed, had been his only toy, his only companion when he lived at #4 Privet Drive. It was also his imagination that offered him peace when he felt so lonely that he thought his heart would break into pieces. It was the many worlds that he created in his mind, that sometimes wound up as parts of his dreams and where, when he was most scared, he would see his mother.

For the longest time, he thought the big castle of Hogwarts was something he had made up and he had devised all sorts of stories of dragons, and knights, and kings, and wizards to go along with the castle. Dark Man often dominated those stories, and his mother helped to shape them.

One of his favourite stories from his dreams and imagination was that the Dark Man was a powerful wizard respected by all in the kingdom. He was intimidating, but it was because he was so intense about everyone doing the right thing. The Dark Man was the great wizard to a silly king, with a long, white beard, who would send the powerful wizard on secret and dangerous missions. Sometimes the Dark Man would be looking for werewolves, or a perfect jewel that allowed one to live forever, or sometimes, the Dark Man would travel to the mysterious continent to look for rare plants.

This was the story that Harry was in. The Forbidden Forest that surrounded him was a world all its own. It was safe wherever the lantern light glowed, but the shadows held mysterious and spooky things. The Dark Man had set his assistants a task which was to recover these sacred blossoms which would be used to make a magical potion that would make someone invincible.

The silly king, which Harry knew now was Dumbledore, and he really wasn't all that silly; more odd, weird, and maybe a bit scary than funny, had a hidden agenda that the Dark Man didn't know about. The king wanted the invincible potion so that he could be king over not just his castle, but everyone in the world.

As the story blossomed in Harry's imagination, the Dark Man made the potion for the king, who drank it, and became invincible. The king began ordering everyone around, and he could read minds, suddenly, too. When the Dark Man saw how terrible the king had become, he made another potion that he tricked the king into drinking and it finally turned him into a frog.

Harry giggled to himself as he imagined the Headmaster as a frog with a white beard and half-moon spectacles.

The giggling and the boy's mirth ended abruptly as his scar flared in pain. It was so overwhelming that he felt sick.

"Stupid. Little. Boy." the hateful sounding voice curled lazily through the cold air until it wrapped itself unwelcomingly around Harry.

Harry's stomach heaved dangerously as he looked up into a hunched looking, grey robed figure whose face was hidden by the deep cowl. He looked around frantically and suddenly realised he was no longer in the clearing. How had that happened? Had he been so lost in his imagination that he'd wandered where he shouldn't have gone?

"Look at you! Mewling little creature," the hateful voice, the one of nightmares, the one he'd heard in Defence Against the Dark Arts class mocked him and then laughed. It was a hideous laughter, somehow hissing, yet rotting. "I can't wait to kill you... to strip the flesh from your bones... to rip your beating heart from your still. Warm. Body." In that instant an odour of vile dirt, putrid death, and grotesquely overwhelming garlic assailed Harry. He could not help himself as he doubled over and vomited what little there was left of his dinner onto the snow.

"Oh dear!" laughed that horrible voice and then the hood was drawn back showing him a hideous face with barely a nose, two red eyes, and an angry, mocking mouth. The hunched creature walked oddly, as if broken, towards Harry. "Let me help you, child!" The hard voice mocked dangerously and Harry, for a moment, was frozen as a very thin, almost emaciated arm emerged from the many folds of grey cloth towards him.

The bony hand touched his fingers and Harry flinched backwards in a crab-scrabble until he smacked his head and back against a thick oak tree and could go no further.

He hurt and he was terrified and panicked and he tried so very hard to cry out for his daddy, but his throat trapped his voice so tightly that all he could do was open his mouth and yell silently.

A grimacing smile graced the horrid face as he leaned closer to the boy who was now failing at pushing himself through the tree he'd backed up against. The monster's eyes had become a deep, menacing blood red and Harry tried, he tried again so very hard to scream but nothing came forth, and the tears ran helplessly down his face.

Relishing the boy's fear, almost bathing in it, the hideous voice whispered, "I am getting sssstronger, Mr. Potter," he crooned to the terror stricken child. "Sssstronger."

Something whistled over Harry's head and the grey cloth billowed into an explosion of mist that swirled rapidly through the trees. Two Centaurs, huge in size to Harry, leapt over him and thundered after the disappearing wizard. A third Centaur knelt cautiously down beside Harry.

"Harry Potter," the Centaur spoke gently.

Harry lifted his face, streaked with tears, and felt even more terrified. He was barely able to squeak out, "I wah m' da'd'y!" before he curled up as tightly as possible, hiding his face against his knees.

It had only been a few minutes that he'd looked away. Snape was sure the children were safe in the glow of the lanterns and the moonlight. When he looked up, though, Harry was nowhere to be seen.

"Harry!" Snape shouted, anger in his voice at the boy having foolishly wandered off. Anger at Hagrid for not having seen the boy wandering.

Draco and Hermione looked up from their blossom gathering. "Where'd he go?" asked Draco.

Hermione moved quickly next to Draco as she heard an ominous sound that seemed to come from the ground itself. "What's that thundering noise?"

"Centaurs!" answered Hagrid, his voice filled with worry and concern.

Snape quickly ushered his two Snakes over to the half-giant. "Take them back to the castle, Hagrid. Fang might be able to help me."



"Aye!" agreed Hagrid as he pulled Hermione to his side and took Draco by the hand. "Fang's got a good nose, even in snow, Professor. Come on, you two."

Snape patted Fang's back. "Find Harry, Fang. Come on, help me!"

Fang let out a low woof and bound across the clearing and into the shadows of the trees. Snape ran behind the boarhound.

It really wasn't that many paces for Snape and Fang. Harry had just gone through the close trees and into the almost darkness. Fortunately, for his beating heart, Snape soon saw his son.

Harry was curled up tightly, and next to him was a large Centaur, watching over him, it appeared.

"Firenze?" asked Snape. He'd had encounters with this Centaur before. He was more friendly to wizards than others of the Centaurs were.

Firenze rose to his four feet, as he glanced down at the still terrified boy. "The evil in this forest tried to take him away."

Snape ran over to his son just as his heart leapt dangerously higher in his throat. "Harry!" he gasped, feeling as though he could barely breathe. He drew the small bundle of boy into his lap as he knelt upon the snowy ground. The boy was trembling, terribly. Snape ran his fingers gently through his son's hair. "Child, I'm here. Daddy's with you." He drew his cloak around Harry, hoping that would stir him, make him aware that he was now safe. "Harry? Please... look at me?" He kissed his son's head and began to rock him. "Harry?"

Suddenly, like one of the snowbells, Harry unfolded in his father's lap and looked up into those dark eyes. Snape almost reeled at the terror in the boy's emerald gaze. It hurt and before he knew it, he was drawn forcibly within Harry's thoughts.

Snape shuddered as the voice, the old, sibilant, seductive voice of the Dark Lord slithered out of the darkness to entrap him. Every bone was chilled as memories of nights spent before Voldemort coursed through him as that voice told him/Harry that he was growing stronger and that he would kill Harry.

He felt Harry's utter terror, his horrible confusion over why someone hated him so viciously, and he felt the child's soul crying out desperately for his daddy, for Snape, to rescue him.

Then Snape saw the face. White as a corpse, but alive and the blood eyes bored down into his soul twisting his Dark Mark until the Potions Master shouted in pain and the world came crashing down upon them both.

A/N: I am sorry this took a bit longer than usual, but the heat has come and our ac is not working as it should. I deal badly with heat and suffered from two, very hot nights. Needless to say, I neither felt like going near the computer, nor writing. I am doing better, though, and we have a wonderful fan that is making up for the lack in the ac. Plus, I have a lovely new recliner/rocker in which I can sit with my laptop and write.

If you haven't voted in my poll, please be sure to do so. The poll will be up until the Christmas Winter Ball at Malfoy Manor.

My thanks to the darling csad21 for writing Rita Skeeter's brilliant article. I'm terrible at journalistic pieces and she was so very kind to write this and it added beautifully to the story.

he last of Wednesday, Oct. 23, 1991 and very early Thursday, Oct. 24, 1991

Pain. It was red. Blood red. Eyes, red, vicious, tormenting. And, it was fear. It was a searing pain in his arm and memories of a night he had tried forever to expunge from his mind. He wanted to shout, to cry, to hurt someone else, but all he could do was crouch down in the darkness as he tried to shut his eyes against the pain of his inner eye.

Green. Not a healthy, summery green, but a sickly, hateful green. It nearly blinded him and as it exploded in eerie silence around him, he heard a scream. An awful, anguished, frightened scream. And he wanted to cry, to shout, but when he tried, the green light was replaced by a horrible fat face of what looked like a walrus. Beady, hateful eyes and breath that smelled of stale, icky alcohol. And that's when he felt pain. Old pain. He heard the crack of bones, and felt the lingering ache of bruises. He did cry, then. He cried for Dark Man. He cried for daddy. He cried.

Time passed, and then it did not. It was a century, then it was a blink of an eye. The world flipped upside down, and then it was all right again.

Warmth. Not a temperature, but the warmth one felt when being held by another. Comfort. Safety. It spilled down about like stardust. Someone knew it was a powerful spell, an ancient spell, a calling upon one of the Elements to heal. Someone else knew it as everything was righting itself, fixing itself, doing its best to become normal.

"Daddy," Harry moaned softly. He couldn't feel daddy, but he knew that he was close. "Daddy?"

"I'm here, child," his father's voice thrummed through his bones and whispered in his ear. "Daddy's here, little one."

Snape couldn't feel Harry, not yet, but he knew that he was still holding that frail, little body. He could feel the ancient magic surrounding himself and his son, healing their pain, keeping the creature, the monster that had attacked Harry, at bay.

"No, don't open your eyes," a voice, Firenze? Said from far away. "Severus, keep your eyes closed and keep Harry's face against your chest."

Snape still couldn't feel Harry, but his memory sense knew his son was in his arms, and he knew that the boy's hands were clutching tightly to his frock coat as he had his cloak wrapped around them both. He obeyed Firenze, and although he was desperate to make sure his boy was safe, he kept his eyes tightly closed and ordered his hand to gently cup Harry's head so that his face would not turn away from his chest.

Harry still hurt, but the pain felt like it was being gently brushed away by the breath of moonlight. He knew his daddy held him tightly and he knew he wasn't supposed to open his eyes. He didn't want to. He wanted to stay where time was frozen so he'd never dream about the monster again.

It was the saltiness of tears that he sensed first. Then he felt their wetness through his frock coat against his chest. All sensation came back and it was a little dizzying, a bit nauseating. Harry whimpered in his arms and he held him tightly.

Snape had no idea what Firenze was doing, but deep down in his soul he understood that this was powerful magic that the Centaur was performing. As more awareness returned, he then knew that not only had he been drawn into his son's mind, but Harry had held tightly onto him both physically and mentally. When the old, old pain of the Dark Mark had flared at the sight of Voldemort, it had locked the minds and the magic of father to son, trapping them in all their fears, all their pains.

It was worse than anything Snape had ever felt from the Dementors his short time in Azkaban.

"Open your eyes now," Firenze said gently, as though his voice might disturb the magic.

The magic was fading, though, drifting away like a gentle mist. Snape slowly opened his eyes, his stomach still up in arms as the horizon of the forest swayed madly. He felt like he was at sea upon deck and very close to losing his dinner. A cool hand, Firenze's, touched the back of his neck, and he felt a soothing cascade of

magic ease his stomach and end the see-saw of the horizon. Snape instinctively pressed his own hand to the back of his son's neck.

"Daddy?" Harry asked plaintively.

Snape's index finger beneath his son's chin slowly urged Harry to raise his face from his father's chest. "Open your eyes, son."

"If you would allow me, Severus?" Firenze interrupted carefully as Harry slowly opened his eyes.

Snape nodded, wondering what the Centaur was going to do. Firenze slowly waved his hand over Harry's eyes, his face frowning in thought, or concern. As he kept his hand over Harry's open eyes, script, far older than runes, appeared in ghostly writing just over his son's head. The Potions Master then understood that the Centaur had cast a kind of diagnostic spell over Harry.

"Is he all right?" asked Snape worriedly.

"He's in shock right now," Firenze replied. "He won't remember the Mind Lock. He's too young and it was the only safe way to heal him."

Snape was still worried. As a skilled Occlumens and Legilimens, he had made a study of the Mental Arts and knew how dangerous a Mind Lock was. It essentially opened the gates of two minds to each other, destroying any Occlumency Shields. Snape had seen and felt not just the fear of the 'monster in the forest' but old fears and pain from Harry's time with the Dursleys. It had sifted so quickly through his own mind, though, that nothing was concrete; there was no absolute memory to settle on. The fear had washed over him like something rotted, and the pain had awakened many of his old injuries.

If this is what Harry's mind had done to him, Snape shuddered to think what his own memories of fear and pain could have done to his son's.

"Are you certain, Firenze?" he asked, doing his best to stop a tremble that had begun fluttering in his chest.

Firenze touched Snape's shoulder, urging the older wizard to look into his eyes. When the Potions Master did glance reluctantly away, he saw the absolute certainty in the Centaur's eyes.

"He will only remember this night, Severus. Your past will not plague his dreams. The healing I've used on him has taken those away," assured the Centaur. "Neither will you suffer dreams of your son's fear."

Snape sighed in relief at that. Harry hardly needed anymore nightmares.

Firenze rose to his feet again and held out a hand to the Potions Master. Making sure that Harry was secure in one arm for just a moment, Snape took the proffered hand and allowed the Centaur to help him to his feet. On his feet, he felt the world tip slightly. Firenze steadied him. Breathing through his nose, the cool, clean air of the fallen snow felt fresh and helped to settle the last of his disquiet. Snape then secured his son in both arms as he cast a Featherlight Spell over the boy.

The Potions Master was preparing to Apparate to the edge of the Forbidden Forest, when Firenze stopped him with a hand upon his upper arm.

"Evil resides within the stone. Its soul may be withered, but therein lies its strength... and weakness." With that somewhat cryptic omen, the Centaur thundered away from the two wizards, swallowed up by the trees.

Snape wanted to ponder on that, but Harry was beginning to shiver, once again, in his arms. Spinning on the spot, they arrived at the edge of the Forbidden Forest, and he took his son up to the castle as swiftly as possible.

Friday, Oct. 25, 1991

Harry knew he shouldn't eavesdrop on the voices, but it seemed they were floating around his bed, and since he didn't feel like either opening his eyes or sitting up, he had no choice but to listen.

"I was a fool!" spat Snape. Harry recognised his father's voice. It sounded the way it did in class right after Neville had melted a cauldron.

"Lock him up then, and throw away the key," came the nonchalant and tired voice of Lucius Malfoy.

"Stop giving me advice I won't follow," growled his father. He could hear the elder Malfoy laughing.

Harry decided he was too tired to figure out what the two men were arguing about. He went back to sleep.

Later That Same Friday

"My boy?" Harry woke from his deep, vague dreams, feeling that something beyond him was wrong. Were there monsters at the end of his bed waiting to eat his feet like he used to worry about when he was little and locked in the cupboard at his aunt and uncle's house?

"Harry? I know you're awake, child," crooned the genial voice. It wasn't his daddy. Daddy didn't croon like that. It felt icky, like honey dripping over him and Harry really didn't like honey all that much. He kept his eyes tightly closed because whoever that was shouldn't be there.

An aged hand touched the small hands that were crossed over Harry's chest. His heart began to beat rapidly. 'Don't touch me!' his thoughts whispered over and over as he remembered those foot eating monsters.

"Listen to me, my Golden Boy," the honeyed voice dripped over Harry's comforting darkness. "The Philosopher's Stone is in danger. There's only one person who can keep it safe."

That hand, dry and papery and skeletal, squeezed his and Harry felt frozen and he wanted his daddy.

"Headmaster?"

Daddy!

"Was there something you needed?" Snape asked. Harry could feel his daddy's barely controlled anger seething beneath his benign query.

"I merely came to see how Harry was doing, my boy. Madame Pomfrey says he has not awakened, yet." Harry knew the Headmaster was smiling, and his eyes were twinkling. He even had a tin of his sherbet lemons in one of his pockets.

"I know he hasn't," said daddy, almost dismissively, and now much closer to Harry. "Madame Pomfrey said the shock he had was a heavy one and he would wake... when he felt it was safe to awaken." Harry felt his daddy's cool, calloused hand touching his.

"What did happen, Severus? Did he see what was killing the magical creatures in the Forbidden Forest?" wheedled the Headmaster with feigned compassion.

Harry could feel distrust, anger, annoyance, and impatience running off his daddy like water. There was so much of it, he wondered why the Headmaster wasn't drowning. His daddy wouldn't reply. Harry felt that daddy wanted to keep it secret. Harry agreed with his daddy.

"If you learn something, my boy, you will tell me," said Dumbledore. Harry heard a tone of voice that was kind, loving even, but he sensed the threat behind it. If his daddy knew something, he'd better tell the Headmaster or he'd get in trouble.

Daddy would not tell. Harry wondered why. Wouldn't the Headmaster be afraid, too, if he knew there was a monster that wanted to hurt... ME. Harry's insides cringed as the ghastly presence of a red-eyed monster swept across his inner eye. IT wanted him and Harry ran, ran, ran until his Dark Man caught his hand and whispered to him.

"Daddy loves you, child. You're safe here with me."

Harry sighed. He wanted to see his daddy, but he was so tired. In his mind, he touched the older wizard's hand, his Dark Man, his daddy, his hero, and assured him that this time he'd only take a little nap and then he would wake up properly.



When the small hand moved over his, Snape gently cupped the fingers in his hand. They were so small, so fragile. And, he forgot, sometimes, just how fragile his son was.

Snape smoothed his son's blankets and tucked the boy's cool hands under them. He didn't know how long they had been atop his chest, but Harry's fingers had felt like ice. He then brushed aside the boy's fringe to look upon the scar. It was only when he'd gotten his son back to the Infirmary that he noticed it had been bleeding. The edges of the scar had been raw, angry, and when he could he had looked at his Dark Mark to see that its edges were just as raw and red. Thankfully, Harry would not remember Snape's memories, according to Firenze, but the attack by Voldemort in the forest had been real and Harry would remember that.

Since almost the start of term, Snape had been teaching Harry and Draco exercises that would aid them in building the constructs that would eventually become an Occlumency shield that would keep their thoughts and memories safe from prying minds. It would also help them to keep unwanted Legilimens out. Snape intended to step up his son's training because he felt the poor boy could no longer handle those visions. Not while the Dark Lord was so close.

And, Snape had also been pondering what Firenze had said, Evil resides within the stone. Its soul may be withered, but therein lies its strength... and its weakness. He had written as soon as he could to Lucius with the phrase, hoping that together they might understand this and figure it out. Lucius had visited briefly on Thursday.

Draco had been highly upset over Harry, and Hermione, although she attended classes, had been unusually silent, although after Potions she had asked Snape how Harry was. He promised Draco and Hermione that they could visit their friend when he woke up.

When Lucius came, he did not immediately go to Snape's office. He found his son, with Hermione in a corner of the library seated together in a large window seat by one of the tall, stain glass windows. He listened as they spoke quietly of their hunt for snowballs. They only knew that Harry had vanished from the clearing and before they had a chance to help in the search, Hagrid was leading them from the Forbidden Forest.

Lucius, still not entirely comfortable with public, or nearly public displays of affection had, at the end of the recitation, sat between the two children as they each leaned against his sides, an arm draped over each of them. He remained this way for nearly all of lunch, scowling at students that stumbled across them, and giving the disapproving old prude, Madame Pince, a deep glare that Snape would have been proud of.

Lucius had then sent his son and friend to their next class and then made his way to the Infirmary.

Harry looked fine. There hadn't been a scratch but for the redness around his scar. Snape looked worse. He hadn't slept at all, yet, and freshening charms did nothing for a haggard face filled with worry.

Lucius found that his friend had been tormenting himself with guilt over having taken the children into the Forbidden Forest despite the evident danger. The older wizard knew that Snape had nothing to feel guilty over. It probably wasn't wise to have taken the children out, but who could deny that they hadn't been well protected?

"I didn't put up a protective ward," Snape had said stubbornly, determined to scourge himself with guilt.

"Have you ever done so before?" asked Lucius pointedly.

Snape had shaken his head. He'd never needed to. He'd been one wizard out in the forest who could easily take care of Blood Fae or Acromantulas. Truth be told, Snape had always enjoyed the aspect of the risk of being accosted while he gathered ingredients. It had further been a challenge each year that he'd negotiated with Firenze for Centaur hair strands from their tails. He was one of the few Potioneers allowed by the unicorns to approach them for blood, hoof shavings, tail or mane hairs, and tears. He was the only... absolutely only Potioneer allowed by the Thestrals to once a month take a phial of the precious oil their wings secreted.

No. He had not thought to put up a shield ward to protect the children, and he was mentally beating himself up over it.

Lucius could not speak to the man when he was so heavily into his guilt and finally chose to leave when the man abraded himself for being a fool.

Snape still felt horrid about not doing a better job of protecting his son, but he was done with the mental castigation. He was a new father and he simply had not thought everything through. Although, he was... no, had been a spy, and he was a Potions teacher, and both required that he think of every eventuality. His logic told him that it was impossible to anticipate all outcomes.

Even so, Snape sat down heavily beside his son's bed and let his head drop into his hands. I'm a terrible father, he thought for the thousandth, millionth time since bringing his son out of the forest.

Snape's head snapped up as Harry whimpered in his sleep. Reaching over, he stroked the worried brow for several seconds and his son let out a small, relieved sigh.

"What did the Headmaster say to you?" Snape whispered so very softly to his child.

Anger rose up inside of him again as his thoughts went back to just moments ago, to when he'd walked into the Infirmary and saw Dumbledore sitting on the edge of his son's bed, his withered, old hand over the boy's own hands. Something feral, deeply protective in Snape had seen that old fraud's hand upon his son; his child who did not like the Headmaster and who was very careful about who he allowed touch him. It had taken every ounce of control he had not to yank the older man by his robes and toss him away from his son, or to pull his wand and hex him to within an inch of his centenarian life!

He could leave Hogwarts with Harry, he tried to tell himself, but knew he couldn't. Not when all the children in Hogwarts were in danger from the Dark Lord hiding someplace within its walls.

Quirrell.

That damned, purple, smelly, turban. Snape knew that the supposedly timid, stutterer had something to do with Voldemort. How was he connected to the vile spirit? Did Voldemort fully possess the man? And, the unicorn blood, and that of the dead Centaurs? Snape was a Potions Master and knew how precious the blood of those creatures was. A unicorn's blood could extend life, if it was given freely. If it were stolen, life would still be given, but it would be a kind of half-life; one of pain that wasn't physical, but

within the soul. As for Centaur blood, there was strength offered there. However, if it was stolen, as it had been from the unicorns that were killed, Snape did not know what the consequences were there. How tenuous was Voldemort's hold on Quirrell?

The question was, though, would the man that was Quirinus Quirrell be salvageable if there were any part of him left?

That was why neither Snape nor Lucius outright killed the man. Although both were capable of killing, if it must be done, it was not something they 'went out and did every Saturday night' for a lark, as some in the Wizarding world still believed of the two ex-Death Eaters.

Snape had collected a few of the books that Lucius had recommended to him. If there was something left of Quirrell to save, they hoped to find the answer in those dark books. Certainly they hoped to find a way to once and for all deal with Voldemort. So far, what Snape had been able to read of one of the books was grimly fascinating.

The Potions Master, even as a boy, had been fascinated by the Dark Arts, but what many witches and wizards did not understand was that just because something was said to be Dark didn't necessarily mean that it was evil. Evil was the intention behind magic and that is what made it Dark. So much of the old magic, or elemental magic was now classified as Dark, and the reasons for doing so oftentimes made no sense.

Blood Magic. Certainly it could be a terrible thing, but there were thousands of spells, potions, and charms that had something to do with blood and could be beneficial yet a great deal of them were considered Dark. Such as the Blood Wards that the Headmaster insisted were so important to protect Harry on Privet Drive. Those were highly illegal.

Snape had learned that those very Blood Wards that Dumbledore had thought he enacted, would have forced Petunia to treat her nephew well, had she an inkling of care for her sister. Petunia had long held no regard for Lily, and in fact blamed the death of their parents upon her younger sister. It made Snape question if, in fact, the Blood Wards had ever been active.

Snape sighed and took out his wand to turn down the lights in the Infirmary. He then took a clean handkerchief from his pocket and Transfigured it into an ottoman that he stretched his long legs out upon. Lightly he touched Harry's shoulder, assuring himself that his son slept easily.

"Severus? You ought to be in bed," came the soft voice of Madame Pomfrey as she came to check on her only patient.

Snape watched as she ran a diagnostic spell over his son. "I must stay here beside him in case he awakens." The medi-witch clucked her tongue as her eyes took in the runes that appeared over Harry.

"He will wake, won't he?" Snape asked worriedly.

Poppy faced him, her hands laced together in front of herself. "Harry has healed from the shock, Severus, but the fright he had must have been a terrible one. He is refusing to wake."

Snape sat up a bit straighter at this. "Could he have awakened then? Beforehand?"

Poppy nodded solemnly. "It's possible. Severus, we do not know exactly what Harry's relatives put him through, but it is very likely that he escaped their influence, at times, simply by staying asleep. It is a defense mechanism that has been seen before in children traumatised."

"Sleep was where his mother was," he nodded, his voice quiet in the wide expanse of the Infirmary.

Poppy smiled a bit, "And where the Dark Man was. Talk to him, Severus. It may be that he's just waiting for you." The matron returned to her office, to her private quarters with a starched swish of her skirts.

Left alone, with the sleeping figure of his small son, Snape looked down upon the boy and was struck, once again, by how young he looked. Harry was eleven, but his body, damaged by his Aunt's erratic feeding of the boy and general lack of proper nutrition, had given him the stunted form of an eight or nine year old. With proper meals, and a Nutrition Potion that his father brewed specifically for Harry, the damage would be repaired. Possibly, by his second year,

Harry's growth would be back to normal and by sixteen, he ought to experience a normal growth spurt. Snape wondered if Harry would inherit James' height, or if, from the *Cruor mea cruor*, that he might receive Snape's (which was a few centimetres taller than Potter).

His son's maturity was different than other boys, too. Oftentimes Harry would act like a seven or eight year old child. That, though, had been stunted by the mere fact that his relatives had not given him the affection any growing child deserved to receive. Snape did not mind this, and secretly was pleased that he could offer simple embraces, or hold his child's hand when he needed it. As the bond between father and son matured Harry's maturity would stabilise as well.

Casting a Cushioning Charm, Snape left his chair and knelt upon the floor, bringing his face in line with that of his sleeping son's face. He brushed his fingers through the silken hair and cupped the warm cheek.

"Harry? It's just you and I here. I know that what happened in the forest was frightening for you." He sighed as the recent regrets and recriminations returned, yet he crushed them beneath his Occlumency discipline. "I showed the snowbells to your mother during our first year here at Hogwarts. I had hoped to extend to you the same experience. I find it... one of the most beautiful of ingredients to harvest." He let out a soft growl as once again his fingers trailed through his son's hair and he leaned his shoulder against the edge of the bed. "I never thought to put up a ward to protect you, and I am sorry for that, Harry. I know how to watch over my Snakes, but I do not make for the best father in the world." He smirked slightly. "If you go by Lucius, he apparently has earned that title from Draco." He leaned, ever so slightly, to kiss the unblemished side of his son's forehead. "Please wake for me, my little diot. I promise to do a better job, to be a better father to you."

A very small, tired voice, whispered with an exhaled breath, "You are the bestest father."

Snape smiled into his son's clear, green eyes and once more gently cupped the cheek that wasn't against the pillow. "Hello there, Harry."

Harry yawned and lifted himself up on his side, on his elbow. He touched his father's cheek and gave him his most earnest gaze.

"You do know that, don't you? That you're the best father? I mean it."

Snape put his hand over the one on his cheek. "Thank you, Harry." After a moment he rose up, took out his wand, and expanded the narrow bed. "I'm tired. Would you mind?"

Harry shook his head and budged over to make room for his father. Snape lay down upon the top of the covers and drew Harry to his side. Harry happily laid his head upon his father's chest and together they both closed their eyes. They slept, free of dreams, never letting the other go.

Saturday, Oct. 26, 1991

"Please? Please, please, pleeeeeeease?"

Snape stared down at his little boy who sat on the other side of his desk in his office. "I never knew you had it in you to be such an annoying child," he quipped in bored tones.

Harry glared for a second, then huffed. "Dad! Madame Pomfrey said I was okay so please... let me play today. Please?"

Snape glowered at his son. Harry had been released from the Infirmary just that morning. Obviously, the disaster that was the excursion to the Forbidden Forest was still fresh in his mind, but not in Harry's. Harry's mind could think of nothing but the Quidditch Little League game today. Snape had told him that it might not be wise for him to play, and Harry had gone into a litany of truly irritating 'pleases'.

Harry did his best to reign in his temper and he spoke with as much calmness as possible as he posed his last argument. "Dad, we don't have a reserve Seeker and if I don't play, nobody gets to play and after what happened to those Gryffindors its just kind of not fair to do that to them. They really want to play."

Snape smothered his smirk, as he regarded his little Slytherin. "It's beastly cold out," Snape countered. Frankly, he never understood playing Quidditch in some of the worst weather possible. Thankfully, the Headmaster had decided that it wouldn't be a good thing for the first years to play in the cold (and it wasn't, yet, snowing again) and

so he'd erected a canopy over the pitch that had a Warming Charm that would 'rain' down over the stands and the players. It was a rather impressive construct and some of the older students, who played the House Quidditch games were discussing whether or not they could have such a canopy over their games.

Harry countered with his best scowl and his arms over his chest. In that second, he so resembled Snape that the older man mock snarled, and with a single snort he relented. "Fine!"

Harry grinned and let out a triumphant shout. Leaping up from the chair, he dashed out of his father's office.

Snape let out a tiny sigh of relief. It was a good sign that Harry had been an annoying, little idiot towards him. He saw it as a sign of trust and had indulged his son's defiance to see how far he might go. He had not expected the... hotly, yet calmly introduced argument. A Ravenclaw would have given him a detailed analysis on why he should play, a Hufflepuff would have simply cried whilst agreeing with him, and a Gryffindor would have either struck out, or not listened to his warning, and then just gone to play. A Slytherin, which Harry most certainly was, had taken his warning with a grain of salt, and then worked up a convincing argument. Snape happened to know that the little league game would have gone on without his son, but he had chosen not to impart this information to Harry.

With the melting of the first snow, the sun was out and the canopy over the Quidditch pitch held enough warmth that it was comfortable for everyone assembled in the stands, and the first years players.

Lucius, with the help of Hermione, had re-organised the two teams. The Growling Pixies now consisted of Draco Malfoy as Seeker, Justin Finch-Fletchley and Ernie MacMillan as Chasers, Millicent Bulstrode as Beater, and Susan Bones as Keeper. Mandy, who decided she didn't like playing the game, had dropped out.

The Silver Dragons were now Harry Potter as Seeker, Teddy Nott and Terry Boot as Chasers, Morag MacDougal as Beater, and Neville Longbottom as Keeper.

The teams rose into the air with the cheers of the whole school behind them. Lucius let go of the Snitch and then trotted, with dignity,



mind you, over to where some of his captains sat. Today's referees were the Weasley twins.

Snape, had eschewed the teacher's box to sit with his Snakes. It afforded him a view of the teacher's box, and allowed him to keep an eye upon Quirrell. He soon learned that the DADA professor was nowhere to be seen. Snape didn't mind. It merely meant that whoever, or whatever Quirrell was couldn't hurt his son.

Harry and Draco played well against each other, although Harry tended to be a bit more daring on his broom. He dove, twisted, made nearly impossible turns, and did it all with fluidity and confidence.

Snape, meanwhile, grit his teeth and suffered minor strokes every single time he thought his son was going to either smash himself into a goal, the stands, the grounds, or another player.

By the time the game ended (Growling Pixies had won and Draco was running around on the pitch with the Golden Snitch in his hand, while both teams raced after him) Snape felt immensely tired, and ready for a nap.

Lucius met him on the pitch and slapped his back, a gesture Snape did not readily welcome. "You appear worse than my players, Severus!" he chuckled.

Snape only managed a glower at his friend. "The boy will kill me with his desire to play this damned game," he muttered.

"You worry too much, Severus," Lucius said as he waved his exuberant son over to them. "Little boys are flexible and bounce."

Snape snorted with a scoff. "And there you have just proved you are no Healer, Lucius!" He muttered derisively under his breath, "Flexible and bounce! Ridiculous!"

Two arms wrapped tightly around his waist, and the scowl was wiped from Snape's face as his forward movement was ended by an ebullient hug from his son. "Draco's good, isn't he dad?"

Honestly, Snape had expected jealousy from his son, a petulant pout that he'd lost to his best friend. Instead, he felt a surge of pride that Harry only had praise for the other boy.

"He did adequately," Snape agreed.

"He was superb!" Lucius broke in, and corrected.

"Was I really, father?" Draco had arrived at his father's side just a few seconds after Harry. He blushed, glowing at his father's praise.

Lucius smiled down at his son, and, for a very brief moment, Snape found himself envious of those smiles. They came very easily to Lucius, but not to Snape. Oh, he had his small smiles, those delicate, and very slight up-turns at the corners of his mouth. When he did smile, mostly at his son, it was more often than not, one of those. Most students probably thought, when they saw him smile like that, that he was probably contemplating boiling his son down for potion ingredients. Dunderheads! Snape knew, though, that he could smile more with his eyes. His eyes were of deepest brown they were so nearly black, but they were as expressive as Eileen's had ever been. With his eyes, he could easily show his son the love he held for him, a secret smile that was meant only for the small eleven year old that now slipped his hand into his.

Scowling, glowering, smirking, perfecting the art of turning his features to stone; those were second nature to him. It was part of hiding what truth lay carefully held within his heart. He'd had to deal with an abusive father, with bullies at school, and then, psychotic dark wizards who tortured him for fun, and finally a sherbet lemon drop popping manipulator who thought he was the next Santa Claus.

Snape had learned that it was unwise to smile.

Snape squeezed Harry's hand, and admonished, "Is it really necessary to do those loop-de-loops that you did in chasing the Snitch?"

Harry looked up at his father as they walked back through the slushy snow to the castle. In the man's eyes was the continuation of his gentle smirk. There was warmth, a caution to be safe, but most of all there was love.

"I suppose not," Harry replied a little quietly, a bit embarrassed. He was just beginning to realise that his father did more than just keep him safe, his father worried about losing him. He had first seen that when he'd finally chosen to awaken to see his father sitting on the floor, leaning against his bed, stroking his cheek. Only for a moment had Harry seen in the older man's eyes how worried he had been for his son; how scared he had been in thinking he might lose him.

Harry didn't want his father to feel that way again. He had known then, as he did now, that his father, should he ever lose his little boy, would die inside. Harry had to live to keep that from happening. He loved his father so very much.

"Ah! Another exciting game!" The chill that joined the Winter breeze emanated from the four Slytherins as the Headmaster approached them. The older wizard, in his ridiculous robes of maroon with golden, flying Snitches in the pattern, reminded Snape of the drawing his son had made of a foolish man, dancing a jig. He wondered, now, why Harry had portrayed the Headmaster in such a way.

Harry's hand tightened on his father's as he moved so close to his father's leg he nearly tripped Snape. Draco openly scowled at the Headmaster he didn't like. Snape showed no expression, nor did he greet his employer.

Lucius was the one to speak, "It was a very good game and they all did well."

Dumbledore barely acknowledged Lucius for a second, but then he eyed Harry solemnly. "I'm sure you'll win the next game, my boy. You play just like your father used to."

Snape scowled as he caught, very clearly, the intended slight. He had never played Quidditch, choosing his books and his potions over the sport. Harry, though, mistaking what the Headmaster said, grinned up at his father. The exuberant boy was a little puzzled by the scowl he found, at first, but it softened the moment Harry caught his father's eye.

The Potions Master said nothing to the Headmaster and drew Harry, who was ready to relate the entire game to his father (despite the fact that Snape had witnessed it), away and after Lucius and Draco.

Draco, of course, was a little, buzzing hum as he told his father all about the game.

Behind them, neither Snape nor his son saw the beginning of a storm in Dumbledore's eyes. The elder wizard still had not reconciled himself with the story his Potions professor had brought to him about Harry's conception. Initially he thought it unlikely that Lily could be capable of an affair, but he couldn't be for certain. Lily had been Severus' friend until their fifth year. He recalled clearly how they spent as much time together as possible, and he knew that, during the summers, they also lived not far from each other. In Dumbledore's eyes, that friendship had been an unwelcome wedge between Slytherin and Gryffindor. In that time, when Voldemort was gathering his followers like a virus that spread with a single breath, their innocent association had not helped growing hostilities amongst the Houses.

Perhaps the Marauders had been... unfair... in their constant pursuit of the Slytherin boy, but the Headmaster had felt then, and still did, that Severus, with his brooding, anti-social behavior, and secretive ways, had only invited their attentions. Certainly Severus had been no innocent that was unable to fight back. The young, skinny Slytherin had often retaliated with the vicious underhandedness that was characteristic of a Slytherin. Severus had once managed a terrible Pox Curse curse that almost, permanently, scarred James' good looks with deep facial craters. It had taken two weeks for Madame Pomfrey to heal James from that curse.

It had only confirmed for the Headmaster what he'd suspected all along, that like his fellow Slytherins, the boy was Dark.

When it came to his attention that the Slytherin boy had been specially recruited by Abraxas Malfoy for Voldemort's attention, he thought no more of Severus. That was until the young man had come to him, hours or possibly days, after having taken the Dark Mark, for absolution. Upon seeing the filthy, angry looking Mark that seeped blood and made Dumbledore dizzy with the evil magic it held, the Headmaster had felt nothing but revulsion. The boy had made his choice and Dumbledore had made his by turning Severus away.

Lily and Severus?

Had she truly been so foolish as to risk a dalliance with Severus Snape, a Death Eater? And while married to James Potter?

Dumbledore had written the WCS the day that the announcement in the paper had shown up. He had inquired about the paternity tests, and had, rather rudely, been rebuffed. His carefully laid plans were crumbling at a phenomenal rate.

He sighed audibly.

When Severus returned to him, only months after Harry's birth, with knowledge of the Prophecy and that he had unwittingly given it to Voldemort, he'd been tempted to capture the young wizard on the spot and hand him over to Aurors. Severus, though, showing more of his heart than ever he had, had fallen to his knees, weeping for him, Dumbledore, to save Lily!

The Headmaster wondered now if it had been a mistake of his more generous nature to not have bound Severus to him. He had Legilimised the boy, though, and had found, remarkably, a contrite heart. Dumbledore promised to protect Lily, and her family, but he had something he didn't have before; someone close to Voldemort.

As Dumbledore watched father and son growing smaller in the distance as they approached the castle, his grey eyebrows knit heavily over his pale, blue eyes with concern. Of course he had reminded Severus about his promise to keep Harry safe, and he meant for the man to do just that. With the matter of Harry inexplicably being Sorted into Slytherin, and then, this odd discovery of paternity, the two wizards were bonding at a rate that was eclipsing the bond he should have with them both. He felt that the control he should have had over Severus and most especially young Harry, was slipping rapidly from his hands.

Dumbledore also did not care for the disturbing development in which Severus was now taking counsel from Lucius Malfoy, the arrogant, erstwhile patrician, the status-seeking Lucius Malfoy. Since the night of the feast, really, Severus had not come to the Headmaster for counsel.

Poor Severus. The deluded, new father had some sort of misguided belief that Harry was a normal, little boy, and Dumbledore knew he was not. If anything, the incidents in the DADA classroom and the

other night in the Forbidden Forest should have proved that to the foolish, younger man!

Dumbledore had warned Severus, even before the boy came to Hogwarts, that Harry would be sorely tested in the years to come before he would ultimately destroy Voldemort. Oh yes, Severus wished to deny what he had seen, or not seen in Godric's Hollow, but Dumbledore knew the truth of it. Voldemort's skill in the Necromantic Arts was unparalleled. He had found a way, temporary though it might be, to cheat death. And, it was that scar on the boy's forehead that the Headmaster knew was the key.

Voldemort had Marked the babe in order to give him a way to come back from Death's clutches.

The trick, though, was in trying to figure out if Harry was truly, at this moment, the son of his mother, Lily, or if he had within him the soul of the darkest wizard since Gellert Grindelwald.

Dumbledore was not pleased that Severus had put him in the position that he must woo the boy back. He needed Severus to begin speaking to him again.

"Headm-m-m-master? I am s-s-s-sorry I missed the g-g-g-game," came Quirrell's stuttering voice at his side.

Only for a brief moment did the Headmaster frown at the young wizard. He then smiled, beatifically. "Ahh, Quirinus! Are you feeling better?" he asked solicitously as he slipped a thin, arm over the younger man's arm.

Quirrell patted the age-spotted hand and gave the older man one of his awkward smiles. "I am, s-s-s-sir. Th-th-thank you." He noticed that Dumbledore's eyes were upon the disappearing figures of Snape and Potter. A red gleam flittered in his eyes, but just as quickly was gone. "Sh-sh-sh-shocking news wasn't it? B-b-b-biological father?"

"Hm, yes," murmured Dumbledore. "As a student you were just after Severus, weren't you, Quirinus?" he suddenly asked.

"T-t-two years, Headm-m-master. Gr-gr-gryfind-d-d-or," he replied, that awkward smile practically glued upon his face. "I have b-b-been meaning t-t-t-to ask, Professor Dumbled-d-d-dore...?"

"Yes? Feel free to ask, Quirinus," encouraged the Headmaster.

"Is it tr-tr-true what I hear ab-b-b-bout the uni-uni-uni..." Quirrell's smile faded to frustration as he couldn't finish what he was going to ask.

Dumbledore finished smoothly for him, "The unicorns?" Quirrell only nodded. "It is, unfortunately, so. The Centaurs seem a-frighted by something in the forest." He patted Quirrell's hand and released him as they reached the large, oaken doors to the castle.

"Th-th-the wards? That is wh-wh-why we are stren-stren- adding to th-th-them," Quirrell said in sudden understanding. "The Cen-cen-cen... they have n-n-never liked us." The DADA professor managed a slightly skewed scowl.

"Too true, Quirinus." Dumbledore smiled at the young man's worry. "We shall keep everyone safe so you need not worry yourself." The Headmaster then made his way into the castle.

"Old fool!" a very soft, menacing, sibilant voice spat from from the DADA professor only when the Headmaster disappeared in the castle. Quirrell nodded his smelly turban in agreement with the voice, and for just a moment, his usually awkward smile was perfectly sublime, perfectly frightening... and the Headmaster never saw it.

Harry had dinner with his father in his quarters, and afterward Snape sat at his desk to correct essays while his son worked on his homework. Harry sat on the floor, with his legs underneath the short coffee table that Snape had transfigured from one of his wingback chairs. The coffee table was in front of the sofa that Harry was using to support his back when he wasn't bent over his work. Said work was spread out on the table along with an inkpot, quill, and textbook for Potions. Snape had assigned an essay that required his first years to choose five potion ingredients, and then to discuss their properties and one potion the ingredient was used it..

Harry had, of course, picked snowbells, and then he'd picked wolfsbane, tiger eye, bubotuber pus, and shankweed. He kept

glancing surreptitiously towards his father's bookshelves and then turned back to his homework. It was going nowhere. Fast.

"Dad?"

Snape didn't look up from the essay he was grading as he replied, "I am not going to give you the answers, Harry."

"What? Oh no! I wasn't going to ask, dad. I was hoping I could maybe look at some of your books?" He lifted his textbook. "Tiger eye, shankweed, and snowbells aren't in it." He was looking hopefully at one of the shelves as Snape raised his eyes from the essay.

Snape nodded, "You may always look at any book that you can reach."

"Thanks, dad!" Harry slipped his legs out from under the coffee table and went over to one of the shelves. There was quiet for several minutes as Harry read the titles of the books. If a title wasn't on the binding, he pulled it out to read the title on the cover.

Harry was getting frustrated as he realised that his father had a LOT more books than he expected. They all looked promising, but he couldn't read the whole library, could he?

Snape had been watching his son through a curtain of his black hair and smirked as he saw that the little boy was overwhelmed by his choices. He decided he could help, a little, since Harry had chosen three ingredients not on the first year curricula.

"Try Madame Wychell's Palliative Plants, the Gathering of Gemstone Essences, and you might try..."

Harry triumphantly interrupted, "The Value of Weeds to a Potioneer!" He smiled and Snape nodded with a light chuckle.

Soon the other two books were found and Harry went back to the coffee table to do his work. He was soon absorbed by the fascinating text that had to do with gathering the essence of gemstones. After he'd written several paragraphs on tiger eye, it was nearly an hour later.



Harry was reminded of the event that was fast approaching. Harry asked, "Dad?" this time he didn't wait for his father to acknowledge him. "Do I have to go to the Halloween party?"

"Everyone is to attend," Snape said automatically as he slashed the essay he was working on with a "T" in the top left corner.

"I know, but..." Harry just noticed that his nervous habit of tapping the quill tip on his parchment had left at least a dozen, small, ink blobs. He began to do his best to clean up the drops, but only succeeded in smearing the ink into larger spots that appeared to be encroaching upon his written text so far.

"Harry," Snape spoke up after several minutes of silence from his son. "The Halloween party will have all your friends there and enough sugar to put everyone into a Diabetic coma for at least a week." He smirked, slightly, at that.

Harry did smile, but it was weak, perhaps forced, and this caused Snape to leave his desk and occupy his wing-back chair, eying his son with concern. "Why would you not wish to go to the Halloween party?"

"I... because..." Harry glared down at his partially written essay, not really seeing the words. With his deep green eyes boring metaphorical holes into the table, he finally said, "I shouldn't." When he dared to look up, he drew in a deep breath, and nearly whispered, "It's when my parents were killed, isn't it?"

Snape felt stung by the confusion and the guilt in his son's eyes and then he briefly wondered, had no one told Harry when his parents had been killed? "Yes, they were. Did your aunt never tell you when it happened?"

Harry shook his head just as a hard look came into his eyes at the mention of his aunt. He bit out, "Aunt Petunia only ever told me that they were drunks who were killed in a car wreck." Under his breath, he added hotly, "And that they deserved it!"

Snape fumed at the hurt and the anger in his son's voice. He needed to visit the Dursleys, and soon. Lucius' contact in the Muggle world was graciously waiting for Snape to give the word that he was 'done with them' before he dealt with them legally.

"Your aunt was a jealous and vicious woman," Snape said softly, with sympathy.

"It was Hermione," Harry replied, seemingly out of the blue. Snape frowned, wondering what Hermione might have done. Before he could ask, Harry elaborated, "She really likes reading *Hogwarts: A History* and she said there was a whole section in there about them. I..." he grimaced, "read it."

Snape closed his eyes and pinched the bridge of his nose in discouragement. He had read the section as well. It was a poetic, romanticised, thoroughly speculative, lurid, and a very highly inaccurate description of the terror that had occurred in the wee hours just after midnight on October 31, 1981. There was an unfortunate number of news articles, books and periodicals that had similar, if not duplicate descriptions of that night and Snape knew it would be impossible to shelter his son from them all.

"Do you believe you should not celebrate at all on Halloween, Harry?" he asked.

Harry looked up into his father's face, seeing his concern, and did his best to answer, "Well... it's sort of unfair, isn't it? Mum and dad are never going to celebrate Halloween and it was a terrible thing. It would be wrong to be... you know..." Harry squirmed uncomfortably and scribbled in the margin of his essay just to be able to do something.

"Happy?" Harry nodded miserably.

With a sigh, Snape moved to the sofa and drew Harry up off the floor to sit beside him. Harry leaned automatically against his father's side, pleased at being able to hear his steady, comforting heartbeat only a short distance away.

"Harry, your parents would not like it if they knew you were sacrificing your happiness. Just because they cannot celebrate with you does not mean that you should avoid celebrating." Harry listened to the sound of his father's voice, and listened to the words, but he wasn't quite convinced. Snape, sensing that his son wouldn't so easily accept his assurances, continued, "Do you know how much your mother enjoyed life?" He felt Harry shake negatively

against his chest. "She loved life so much that when you were born, she could not wait to show you all that was wonderful about it. I think she... and Po-James would much prefer that you enjoy Halloween with your friends."

"Did you know me when I was little?" asked Harry.

Snape was momentarily thrown by the question that seemed to have nothing to do with what they were discussing. However, the Head of Slytherin gathered himself. After all, he had suffered many conversations with his Snakes that tended to leap about here and there, sometimes never making sense to him, but the child was nearly always satisfied with the counsel he'd given.

The Potions Master allowed himself to think back to that time. It had only been a few months, for him. Mostly awkward meetings with a few of the member of the Order of the Phoenix that always reminded Snape of his days at Hogwarts as a student. Lily had accepted him, and even Lupin seemed to have nothing but kind words for him. Which he, naturally, ignored. Black had been the worst with always an insult upon the tip of his tongue, or his wand at the ready. Snape had no reason for wanting to convince the damned mutt that he was spying for the side of the Light. He really didn't care what Black thought of him. And then there was Potter. Hostility between he and Potter had ceased upon leaving school, but Snape still harbored an ill will toward the man that had been a bully, and had eventually taken Lily from him. Potter, not being entirely stupid, had deemed it best to just leave the dark figure alone and only addressed Snape if he needed to. Lily, it seemed, took the same tact.

Except for those few times when she'd brought little Harry with her. It had seemed important to her that everyone lavish their affection upon the little boy. Something that nearly everyone in the Order had no trouble doing. It had been... uncomfortable... for Snape when the same was expected of him.

No one seemed to understand that he couldn't risk any positive emotion towards the boy. They never seemed to realise that nearly after every meeting of the Order, he had to stand before the Dark Lord and radiate hate for Muggles and Muggle-borns. Had Voldemort, with his intrusive Legilimens, ever seen that the Potions Master had affection for the small, green-eyed boy, he'd have been a dead wizard!

It still rankled his senses that no one ever seemed to understand what he'd gone through. Not even Dumbledore, who spouted his utmost trust in the Slytherin, and professed his affection for him, had no compunction in sending Snape back into the proverbial arms of that madman. For a moment, Snape felt one of those dark chills as he became conscious of the fact that the old wizard would probably send him back if Voldemort returned.

So, yes, he'd known of Harry Potter, but he didn't know the boy. Except for that one time.

Lily had sent him a brief note after one of the meetings two weeks before she and Potter were killed. The war had been escalating and the Dark Lord was sending forth his Death Eaters to terrorise Muggles and anyone who sympathised with them.

Snape had nearly ignored the requested meeting by Lily in the Forbidden Forest, but at the last minute, more worried for the risk she'd be taking in leaving her place of hiding, he had gone.

Well towards two in the morning with the crescent moon high in the night sky, he traveled into the forest and found Lily where he had first shown her the snowbells.

He was struck dumb by the sight of Lily dressed in a white cloak, trimmed in fur. She blended in with the snow upon the ground, and seemed ethereal with the snowflakes swirling gently around her and falling to the ground. Had it not been for a flash of her red hair sparking like fire in the feeble light of the crescent moon, he would not have seen her.

"Lily," he spoke softly, his voice as peaceful as the snow that fell around them silently.

"Severus!" She turned abruptly and he saw in her arms, wrapped warmly also in white, was her raven haired son. Harry was trustingly asleep in his mother's arms.

Snape could not stop the look of derision upon his face as he saw the small baby. The baby, who even at that fragile age, had the gall to resemble his father.

"He is my son, too, Severus," Lily admonished sharply. Her voice caused the boy to stir slightly in his mother's arms and she began to bounce him tenderly to keep him asleep.

"Why have you risked yourself to come here?" his voice was silken steel as his words cut across hers.

Lily moved until she was uncomfortably close to the wizard all dressed in black. Her voice remained soft as she hurriedly explained, "I don't believe that hiding is enough, Severus. He will find us."

"He cannot," insisted Snape, his tone implying that her fears were foolish. "You are under Fidelius..."

Lily interrupted sharply, "A Fidelius can be broken!" Her voice was still soft, despite her anger. "It isn't enough and no one believes me. Not even James because Albus has told him it is enough." Lily was interrupted as her son yawned in his sleep and a tiny fist emerged from his wrap. Snape watched as she took a moment to gently tuck her son's hand back into the wrap and she kissed his cheek. Her deep jewel-green eyes captured his as she spoke again, "I'm afraid, Severus." She looked down at her baby. "For him."

"Albus has done everything possible to keep you safe," Snape tried again to insist.

Lily's eyes sparked with a Floo green fire as her anger, and fear rose, "It's not enough and you know it, Severus! I will not allow that beast to harm my son and I want you to help me!"

Snape was shocked. He leaned back just as Lily's hand caught his wrist and pulled him back towards her. "What do you expect me to do?" he snapped, and his voice cracked like a broken twig in the forest. It was shocking, but Lily did not let go, nor move away from him.

"Promise me, Severus. Promise me that you'll keep him safe!" Her hand gripped his fingers so tightly it was hard for him not to wince. "Please!" Her voice became husky with her pleading.

Snape yanked his hand from Lily's grip and used his Occlumens to keep his anguish at refusing her from his eyes. "I am unable to do so, Lily," his voice was taut. "You know what I am. Do not...!"

Harry chose that moment to wake. He yawned and his tiny fists worked their way out of his wrap as he finished his luxurious stretch. Blinking, he turned eyes that were sea green with his youth upon the dark man. He gurgled happily and smiled.

Snape felt himself arrested by the baby's gaze. Although the colour of the eyes were lighter, they were very clearly Lily's eyes. They held all the innocence and wonder that Lily's own gaze had treasured when he knew her as a child.

"He could discover my treachery, Lily," Snape said, his voice hoarse with regret as he stared down at the baby who continued to smile upon him with complete trust. "He could learn that..." To his horror, Snape found himself drawing the pad of his index finger over the soft, warm cheek of the tiny baby. This was what he could not allow. This would mean his death if the Dark Lord ever should discover this... this...

Lily's hand touched his cheek and he closed his eyes; both afraid of her touch, and yearning for it. "Severus, please. For the friendship we once had, keep my son safe. You know you're the only one who can."

Mirroring the touch Lily had, still, upon his cheek, he carefully cupped Harry's cheek. However, his hand was so large, and the baby was so exquisitely small that Harry's head was easily cupped in the wizard's gentle touch. Snape's dark gaze looked deeply into the beautiful green eyes, and he made his promise. With the snow eddying softly about them beneath a velvet black sky and a curved slice of the moon, Snape promised Lily, and then...

"I promise you, Harry, I shall do everything I can to keep you safe..." he glanced into Lily's contented gaze, "...and happy."

Powerful magic, glittering silver and gold, drifted down around the three to mix in with the tiny flakes of snow. Little Harry giggled as the magic sank sweetly into him and Snape allowed the little boy to grasp hold of his finger.

Lily smiled first at her son, and then up at Snape. Relief was in her lovely eyes, and although there was a part of him that was screaming at his foolishness, he shut that part away behind a heavy

door of triple-planked oak, and bestowed upon Lily the last smile he would ever give to her.

"Dad?" Harry asked as he looked up at his father who seemed to be very far away.

Snape pulled himself away from the past, and smiled down at his son. That smile, one of those that were so very rare, that had been much easier for him when he was a child Harry's age, was one very similar to the last one he'd imparted to Lily. It was brief, so very brief, but it was enough for Harry. It didn't answer his question, but somehow, it was much more perfect to the little boy than words ever could have been.

Monday, Oct. 28, 1991

Just before breakfast Snape met with his Snakes in their common room. The students were all assembled, no one sitting, but all of them standing with their year mates. His eyes scanned over them.

"Mr. Crabbe," he scowled, "when was your robe last laundered?"

Vincent Crabbe looked down at his school robe which had some obvious wrinkles as well as a jam custard stain on the chest.

"This is my cleanest one, sir," he replied with a shrug.

With a huff of disapproval, he crooked a finger to the boy to urge him to come forward. When the large boy lumbered towards his Head of House, there were a few snickers that Snape glared into silence.

"Scourgify!" Snape waved his wand and the stain was gone. "During your free period today, see about making sure your clothing and robes are laundered."

Crabbe nodded and then headed back to his place in the assembly. "And, Mr. Crabbe, make certain that your clothing gets into the weekly laundry collection, on time, or you'll be serving a detention in the laundry with the elves."

Crabbe gulped audibly, nodded, and whispered, "Yes, sir."

Once he noted that everyone else was suitably presentable for the day, he began with his small speech.

"I am going to be at the Ministry today for Professor McGonagall's hearing. This may turn into an all day affair considering the haphazard nature of these Board of Governors hearings. Be on your best behavior or I will know of it, and any detentions gained will be doubled by me, and served with me."

Snape then looked toward the Silver Trio. Hermione looked a bit pale, so he noted that he would need to give her a Calming Potion. Draco looked bored, and Harry simply appeared worried. He was holding Hermione's hand.

"Mr. Malfoy, Mr. Potter, and Miss Granger, as you three are directly involved, you'll be coming with me. I will meet you in the Entrance Hall right after breakfast."

"Yes, sir," they each replied in turn.

Snape then returned his gaze to his entire House. "There will be no Potions classes today, however, that will not release you for a class period. During the time that would be your class you are to go to the Great Hall to do your homework. Hagrid is monitoring today and if I should find out that any of you," his dark orbs scraped warningly over his Snakes and they gulped, shuddered, or nodded quickly. "try to influence our Groundskeeper from his duty, you will have me to answer to."

Snape smirked as all of his Snakes were now in line and prepared for the day ahead. "Go to breakfast!" He dismissed them curtly.

Snape met his three charges in the Entrance Hall. Harry's hair, which tended to go a bit wild still despite being coarser and heavier like his adopted father's, was quickly subjected to a spell by Snape that smoothed it. Harry thanked him. Hermione, who had trouble making her overly curly hair behave on the best of days, asked her Head of House if he could try that spell on her hair. With a slight modification Hermione's springy, soft brown curls became gentle waves that fell just below her shoulders. Snape merely sniffed at it, since Dumbledore and Minerva had arrived. Hermione was ecstatic at the change.



"We're going to use a port-key to get to the Ministry," instructed the Headmaster as he held forth a yellow rubber ducky. Snape sneered at the silly toy, but made sure that his Snakes each had a hold on it. Dumbledore touched his wand to the ducky and the six were yanked away to London, just outside a rather inconspicuous, red, phone booth.

Draco had done well with the port-key since he'd traveled that way before. Hermione was a little bit dizzy, but she kept on her feet. Harry, threw up.

Poor Harry was so mortified at what he'd done, he ran towards a hedge and hid within it.

"Harry!" called Draco with the intention of helping his friend.

Snape held the boy back. "Mr. Malfoy, I think I will take care of this." He looked up at Minerva. "Perhaps you and the Headmaster could take Mr. Malfoy and Miss Granger inside?"

Minerva nodded, her gaze flitting sympathetically over towards the part of the hedge where Harry was firmly hidden. With a wave of her wand, Harry's mess was removed from the sidewalk. She and Dumbledore took the two children over to the red phone booth where they stepped inside and soon dropped away from view.

Harry was angry at himself for what he'd done. Of course, he didn't know that port-key travel would make him feel like his insides were being pulled to the outside (and wasn't that the grossest feeling ever?).

Why did I have to throw up? He asked himself mournfully. Harry just knew he'd completely embarrassed his Dark Man and he wanted to kick himself a thousand times. The Dark Man would be angry, too, and Harry had the sudden, and irrational thought that maybe – please, no! - he'd be sent back in disgrace to his relatives. The thought made his stomach feel achy, and sour, and he just curled up tighter, squeezing his eyes tightly so he wouldn't cry.

He never realised that he had begun to chant a phrase he always hoped would placate his aunt.

Snape was immediately irritated, but took a few deep breaths. He needed patience for this, when the last thing he wanted to be was patient. Not with the hearing soon to begin. He had to remind himself, as he often had to with his youngest Snakes, that this wasn't Harry's fault. Very few children did well with their first port-key. Miss Granger had put on a brave face, but he'd noticed the tell-tale drain of colour from her cheeks that her stomach had fared no better than Harry's.

He walked over to the hedge that surrounded a non-descript building where his son was crouching. As he pushed aside the snow draped branches he sighed heavily when he heard the faint litany of 'I'm sorry, Aunt Petunia, please don't!'

Harry had his arms wrapped around his knobby knees and his face against those knees. He was rocking himself, completely unaware that the snow under him had begun to melt and was soaking into his robes.

"Harry?" he spoke gently, but firm enough to push through his son's fearful chant. "Listen to me. You're not in your cupboard and your Aunt Petunia is not here to punish you."

For a moment, it seemed Harry didn't hear his father, but he raised his head slightly and blinked. There were no tears in his eyes. There was confusion mixed with fear, and Snape felt his heart tighten uncomfortably.

"I made a mess," he said worriedly, his teeth chattering as a cold wind managed to wend its way through the hedge.

Snape cast a Warming Spell. "This was your first time traveling by port-key, Harry. It takes awhile to get used to it, so it is perfectly natural for you to get sick."

Harry's eyes darted to beyond the hedge and over his father's shoulder. "Are you sure Aunt Petunia isn't there, daddy?"

"Positive. The woman would not dare to come near you with me as your father." He gave Harry one of his small, encouraging smiles and held out his arms. "Now, will you come out of there before you freeze."

As he uncoiled a bit more, Harry suddenly realised he was in the middle of a hedge. He grimaced as he felt his bottom was also wet from where he'd been sitting. His cheeks coloured, but Snape urged him to come out where he promptly dried his robes and trousers. With a hitched sigh Harry allowed his father to wrap him in his arms and his heavy, wool, outer cloak.

At that moment, the street which was rarely trafficked, became occupied by a woman wearing bright pink galoshes as she hurried to wherever she needed to be. She gave the tall, strange looking man all in black, and in a black cloak as well, an odd, questioning look.

"Freaks!" she muttered with a nasty scowl.

Unbidden shame and anger rose up inside of Harry and he couldn't stop himself from yelling at the rude woman, "Go away!" In that very same instant a strong wind whipped up and behind the Muggle pushing her away down the street with a screech where she finally disappeared around a corner.

Inwardly, Snape wanted to applaud his son's well-aimed accidental magic. Unfortunately, as the responsible adult, he had to take his son to task. Pulling Harry away slightly, and holding onto his upper arms, he gave his son his most disapproving look as he admonished, "Harry, I realise that what that woman had to say was quite rude, but you must control your temper. It is imperative that we do not reveal what we are to Muggles."

Harry pouted as he felt his tummy rolling inside of him. This was an awful day so far, and he'd tried to be so good. He couldn't stop the one tear that fell from his eye and onto his cheek. "But you're not a 'freak', daddy."

Snape hissed, clamping down on a number of curses he wished to deal to the Dursleys. He noted that Harry said his father wasn't a freak, but that he possibly felt that he deserved the insulting moniker. "You're not a freak, either, Harry."

More tears stung Harry's eyes and he did his best to blink them back, but his eyes glistened like emeralds from them as he spoke with a slight hitch in his voice, "Am, too! I threw up an' embarrassed you, and got my clothes wet, and made you mad at me. I'm just a useless freak! And now you're gonna send me back to them!"

Snape had to silently count to ten. He picked up his son, cradling him close to his chest as the boy's legs wrapped around his waist. He wouldn't normally do this, but Harry was still small, and light enough for him to do so. With a flourish of his right arm, his outer cloak settled over the small boy, effectively hiding the bundle from prying eyes.

Entering the phone booth, and comforting his son, they were both soon in the Ministry and at the reception desk to get their wands checked. It took a bit of extra maneuvering to get Harry's wand, but it was quickly checked with Snape's and he was able to whisk his son over to an alcove where he could quietly speak to him.

Harry had stopped his weeping and was trying to tell himself to stop being such a baby. The thing was, he felt safe, warm, and wanted in his father's arms, and a tiny voice whispered to him that he just ought to stay put... forever. Harry did need his daddy, but he was smart and knew that someday his daddy wouldn't be able to carry him like this. That was another good argument against the baby argument.

His father's hand patted his back reassuringly and he let out a shuddery sigh with a whispered apology.

"Shhh, my little idiot," Snape's voice was just loud enough for Harry to hear and he could hear the resigned smile in his father's silken voice. "You have nothing to be sorry for, Harry. You are my son and I promise you, with every breath of my existence, there is no way you will ever return to those horrid relatives of yours."

"No matter what I do, daddy?" Harry asked in the quiet of the alcove.

Snape cupped Harry's chin in the palm of his hand so he could look directly into his son's eyes. "There is nothing on Merlin's green earth that would ever make me turn you away. Nothing."

For a long moment Harry looked deep into his father's eyes. He reveled in the warmth he found and allowed the love to drape him from head to toe. He was safe, and loved, and it wouldn't ever matter how many times he got sick from port-key travel, or tripped, or if he got a T on an exam, or forgot to do his homework. Nothing, daddy said, and he means it. Harry nudged his head against his

father neck for a moment and whispered into his ear, "I love you, daddy."

Harry giggled at an extra tight squeeze, and when his father put him down, and straightened his robes, and the tie he'd worn that day (Slytherin green, of course), he proudly walked beside his father, happy that he'd always be there.

With his hand to his son's back, he spoke only loud enough for Harry to hear. Of course, Harry was too fascinated by the row of Floos on either side that kept bursting into green flame and depositing someone onto the hearth.

"What?" he asked stumbling slightly because he was too dazzled by the Floos, and the flying memos, and everyone clickity-clacking on the marble tiled floor here and there.

"Pay attention, Harry," his father's stern voice ordered. "These hearings can be tedious, or turn into all out arguments. I want you on your best behavior regardless of the questions you get asked, or if you get stared at."

Harry gave him a worried look just as they stepped into a side elevator. "Am I going to get stared at?"

"You might," Snape hated to admit. "There are those that question me as your father. They will look for any excuse that I am possibly mistreating you."

Harry frowned and gripped his father's hand just as the elevator lurched to a quick start. "That's wrong! And mean!"

Snape smirked. "Quite true, son, but adults sometimes are. Just be a good boy for me, would you?" He cupped the back of his son's head briefly before drawing Harry close to his side since the elevator would soon be lurching to an abrupt halt.

Harry smiled up at his father and leaned against him. "Okay, dad."

They left the elevator and then made their way down a busy corridor to a large room that was shrouded with a Silencing Charm that kept those outside the room from eavesdropping, a Disarming Spell that blocked most wizards and witches from using their wand (Snape

noted that it did nothing against wandless magic), and an Alarm ward that would alert someone, possibly the Auror Corp, if there was trouble.

A large round table sat in the middle of the room. Thirteen chairs were assembled around half of the table, and six chairs were opposite the thirteen. The Headmaster and Minerva were already sitting together in two of the chairs. Snape sat on Minerva's left side and had the children sit beside him.

"I expect all three of you to remain silent and to speak only when spoken to," he ordered softly.

"Wotcher, Hermione!" Snape groaned inwardly as he saw the arrival of Nymphadora Tonks. For once she was dressed rather sedately in the black and blue trimmed robes that denoted she was a junior Auror. Her hair, not pink for once, was a dark blue.

Hermione waved, a bit nervously at the Metamorphmagus. "What are you doing here, Nymphadora?" demanded Snape.

She gave her old professor a cheeky smile. "Today's assignment. I get to watch all you boring adults go at each other. At least, verbally. No fights." She wagged her index finger at him.

Snape sneered. He just hoped the young Auror would keep quiet and stick to the shadowed corners of the room.

A bong chimed, and Tonks did just as Snape had silently wished. She blended into a dark corner, and was, as far as he was concerned, out of sight and out of mind.

A door behind the thirteen chairs opened to admit the twelve governors that made up almost all of the Board of Governors. Lucius Malfoy wore a dark grey suit and a similar dark robe. Draco caught his friend's hand just as he was about to wave to Lucius, and pushed Harry's hand down against his thigh. Draco shook his head tautly and Harry nodded in understanding.

Once the twelve witches and wizards were seated in their chairs, a thirteenth wizard, wearing royal blue robes, stepped through the doorway. This wizard was tall, at least an inch taller than any wizard in the room. His arresting purple eyes were elegantly almond

shaped and slightly upswept near the temples. His hair was a deep, garnet red and perfectly straight. Two thin braids framed his severe and solemn countenance.

This was Balor Thorn, the Governor Superior of the Board of Governors. Snape had never met him, but had heard that the wizard had High Elf blood in his ancestry. By looking at the man's height, his bearing, and his bone structure, the Potions Master doubted it was a rumour.

Balor Thorn stood, facing the small contingent from Hogwarts. He carefully regarded each of the children, and then the adults. Minerva froze under his scrutiny, Snape simply returned the wizard's stern look, and Dumbledore, true to form, smiled disarmingly. Snape felt a tiny bit of triumph as the elder wizard's smile only caused Thorn's expression to get more severe.

Balor Thorn's glare went into a dark, warning realm towards the Headmaster and in that moment Snape realised that this wizard was a match, at least in power, to Dumbledore. He knew, of course, that he was foolish to think that Dumbledore and Voldemort were the only powerful wizards he had known. Still, it was a fascinating revelation.

Minerva smirked very briefly at her colleague as she noted Snape's sudden understanding. She was old enough to know that there were other witches and wizards as gifted as Dumbledore, Thorn, Voldemort, and Grindlewald. The old witch was certain that Snape was just as powerful, though he often underestimated himself, and then there were the three children seated beside him. All children had such potential.

Thorn rose to his feet. "Thank you for coming today, ladies and gentlemen." His curious, purple gaze dropped to Minerva. "Madame McGonagall, however august a body we may appear, we are not the Wizengamot, and so this hearing may be, at worst, rather haphazard. I apologise in advance for that."

Minerva nodded. No one saw her hands twisting nervously in the drape of her robes.

Thorn then glanced sharply at his colleagues, "If I may remind everyone? We are here to discuss the negligence of Professor

McGonagall in the charge of her duties as Head of Gryffindor House. Recently she tendered her resignation as Deputy Headmistress, to our satisfaction. Her tenure as the Transfiguration instructor is not to come into question, either, since all of us have agreed that in that profession she still surpasses her betters."

Minerva's pale cheeks coloured slightly at the off-handed compliment, but that was the only reaction she provided.

Thorn then seated himself and perched a monocle within the orbit of his left eye. He looked down at a stack of papers and did not look up as he asked, "Please tell us, Madame, how long have you been Head of Gryffindor?"

Minerva cleared her throat before clearly answering the question. "I replaced Loris Macneel in 1958."

Dumbledore spoke up, "I believe you'll recall that Loris was killed..."

The Headmaster was interrupted by an iron-haired wizard with hard eyes. He wore dark brown robes trimmed with rabbit fur. His skin was weathered brown and possibly as hard as his gaze. "MacNeel's death was never proven to be homicide, Professor Dumbledore!"

"Mandlebrot!" Thorn intervened harshly. "It's an old argument and we won't go into it here."

The wizard, Armin Mandlebrot, crossed his arms over his chest, huffed, and then waved his hand sharply at the air, indicating that the hearing should be continued.

Thorn went back to his notes. "Your time as Gryffindor's Head was rather exemplary, Madame, until the arrival of James Potter, Sirius Black and..." he paused, looking apologetically towards Snape, "Severus Snape."

Snape's stomach coiled uncomfortably. He had not expected his past to be examined at this hearing.

Balor Thorn continued, his gaze becoming slightly askance between his notes and the Head of Gryffindor. "The altercations between these two students and Severus Snape is..." he shook his head.



A witch finished sharply, "Unconscionable!" Snape glanced to the witch and recognised Elba Twinnitch who had been a seventh year Ravenclaw when he began teaching at Hogwarts. She wasn't a pretty sort of woman, but she had a regal air about her that wasn't easily dismissed.

Thorn held up his hand and gave the witch a squinty-eyed scowl as his monocle remained in his left eye.

"Indeed. This reveals a pattern of bullying..."

Thorn was interrupted by the same witch who hissed under her breath, "Abuse!"

Thorn scowled again, but this time he slowly removed the monocle. It was a gesture that Snape noted clearly made the rest of the governors uncomfortable. He wondered what Balor Thorn did to punish his errant board members. Wisely, the amused smirk he felt he did not allow to reach his face.

"Bullying," Thorn repeated firmly. His gaze turned to Minerva. "Frankly, I'm rather puzzled, Professor McGonagall. The offenses, although seemingly mild, continue without any obvious punishment beyond points lost and detentions for seven years!"

Snape was surprised as a small hand slithered its way into his and squeezed his fingers in reassurance. The anger from this resurgence of the past, eased somewhat at Harry's comforting touch.

"Other students received the same punishments for similar infractions!" Minerva defended, her voice just a touch shrill.

It was Armin Mandlebrot who spoke, "Aye. They did, Madame. However, those other students, in other Houses rarely needed a lesson taught twice, rarely, thrice. This... band of hooligans that named themselves the Marauders, never, it appears, learned their lesson! In seven years!"

Elba Twinnitch chimed in, rather triumphantly, "Bat Bogey Hex, Tarantallegra, Boil Hex, Hair Colour Jinx, Slime Jinx, Stinging Hex... oh my, Sirius Black was quite fond of that one!"

Lucius Malfoy interjected, floating a parchment to Minerva and a copy to Dumbledore, "From Madame Poppy Pomfrey. That is a report that shows student Severus Snape as having been sent to the Infirmary an unprecedented number of times." His voice became hard, although his countenance showed incessant boredom. "I shudder to think what would have awaited Miss Granger at the hands of her then fellow Gryffindors had she remained in your House, Professor McGonagall." His spine stiffened with anger as he settled his gaze upon Dumbledore, "And you, Headmaster, have the audacity to sit there as though this is all some sherbet lemon induced lark!"

Minerva jabbed the Headmaster with her very pointy elbow and scowled at him as she growled, "At least show some gravity, Albus!"

Thorn's voice overrode the murmuring amongst the Board members, "Professor McGonagall, you took on the Head of Gryffindor House and the Deputy Headmistress duties the same year that the Marauders and Professor Snape were first years, is that correct?"

"No," she replied stiffly. "They came to Hogwarts in 1971. In 1958 I was to take on the duties of Head of House, but Loris Macneel, then Deputy Headmistress..."

"Was killed," interrupted Dumbledore.

"...died." Minerva said staunchly, looking daggers over her spectacles at the Headmaster. "It was Headmaster Dumbledore who thought I should take over both duties until a replacement was found for the Deputy duty."

"Obviously a replacement was never found," snorted Mandlebrot.

Dumbledore added, "I decided after Minerva was two years in the position that she was entirely competent as Hogwarts Deputy Headmistress. I have seen no reason to dismiss her since then, and I regret having been forced to accept her resignation."

"Professor Snape," Thorn addressed Snape as he eyed him through his monocle lens. "You've been a teacher of Potions and Head of Slytherin House since 1980. According to what Madame Twinnitch discovered, you've been assisting Professor McGonagall as a secretary for three years?"

"Six," Snape replied shortly.

Thorn nodded. "I didn't find anywhere that your position was formalised. Did you just... volunteer, Professor Snape?"

Snape spoke softly, "I had extra time during the summer. I offered my help."

"I also see here," Thorn scrutinised his paperwork, "that you have taken on at least two-thirds of Professor McGonagall's detentions for the last five years. Why is that?"

Snape didn't hesitate in replying, "Professor McGonagall found herself tiring more in the last five years, and as she also had Deputy duties, those tended to come before her Head of House duties. It was little trouble to me if I had one miscreant or four."

A very quiet witch, her hair nearly white with age and hanging loosely about her shoulders, spoke up, "Minerva, dear, do any of the other staff help you at all?"

"No, they do not," Minerva replied smartly. The witch who spoke was Astrid Greengrass who had been Minerva's mentor in Transfiguration. "Filius Flitwick has always worked closely with his Ravensclaws, and he has a very large family. I believe his first great-grandchild was born this year."

Astrid Greengrass nodded and smiled at the information. "Pomona Sprout not only has her Head duties, but she also takes care of the gardens that the house elves use for Hogwarts."

Astrid leaned slightly forward, "I know Professor Binns is helpless to offer assistance, but what of Charity Burbage, Sybil Trelawney? Aurora Sinistra? or Rolanda Hooch? Have none of them offered you assistance?"

Minerva was not inclined to speak ill of her colleagues, and those she considered friends, so she shifted uncomfortably under the witch's deep blue gaze.

Snape spoke up, having no such compunction, "Professor Hooch has made it plain that if it hasn't anything to do with brooms or

Quidditch, she wishes nothing whatsoever to do with it. She has a disturbing lack towards taking points or giving detentions and has been reported once, this year, for leaving her class unsupervised.

Astrid eyed the young wizard with a knowing expression, "Yes, Professor Snape. I've your report here. Will you tell me of the other teachers?"

He nodded in acknowledgment and went on, "Professor Burbage has offered to help, but she tends towards flightiness and since she only recently became an instructor, she often treats the students as if they are still her classmates. Perhaps when she is older?" He said with a shrug. Professor Sinistra is our Astronomy instructor and due to the fact that her classes are at midnight she is generally unavailable for detention. However, she does help all of us out with end of term grading, and she takes on more after hours monitoring than the other instructors as it fits her schedule."

"Then, Professor Trelawney?" asked Astrid.

Both Minerva and Snape gave a snort at the Divination teacher's name. Astrid smiled in amusement.

The hearing continued until lunch time. More arguments broke out, more parchment was floated or shoved or tossed at others, Dumbledore kept smiling serenely, and questions were asked and unfortunately re-asked a dozen different ways. When a break in the proceedings finally released them, Snape found himself in charge of three bored, and slightly cranky Snakes.

Three floors up was a cafeteria with an enchanted dome that was very much like the one at Hogwarts. The cafeteria was run by elves all wearing bright yellow tea towels.

Not wishing to talk to, or even face an adult, Snape ushered the children to a quiet table where they all ordered lunch. Snape worried over a Caesar salad and weak tea while the children ate quickly and then amused themselves with a large, wizard-created pond at the center of the cafeteria that held very large koi swimming in it.

"We've got peacocks, but no fish," commented Draco as he lay upon his stomach upon the wide wall that enclosed the pond. He was

having a staring contest with a large silver-white koi with black and orange spots.

Hermione sat half turned towards the pond, and half turned towards her teacher. She watched as Harry, also on his tummy, wriggled his fingers in the water in order to entice a bright orange koi closer to him.

"There's a large pond in the park near where I live," added Hermione. "I saw some tadpoles once in it."

"Did you ever catch any so they could turn into frogs?" asked Harry.

"I sort of wanted to, but I didn't have an aquarium for them," she sighed.

"Dumblefrog," Harry chuckled to himself.

"What?" asked Draco as his koi suddenly flipped and swam away from him. "Did you say something about Dumbledore?"

"No. I said Dumblefrog. Do you think dad could make a potion that would turn him into a frog?" He giggled. "He could keep the beard and his glasses."

Draco giggled. "Oh! We've got to ask him! I'd love to see a Dumblefrog!"

"That's silly," smiled Hermione. "Where did you come up with that, Harry?"

"Well, before... uhm... you know in the forest? I was just making up a story. I always used to do that since I didn't always get Dudley's books before they were thrown out."

Before he could dip into a melancholy mood, Draco asked, "Can you tell it to us?"

Harry brightened. "Sure!" He proceeded to tell his friends the story of the foolish king who had his greatest magician brew a potion that allowed him to read all the minds of his people in the kingdom. "The king was getting so powerful because he had all this information from his subjects, that he was scaring his advisors. So the advisors

went to the great magician and asked him to do something about the king." Harry shifted so he was now sitting on the edge of the pond and continued his story. "The great magician brewed this wonderful potion that smelled of lemons, and tasted like them, too, so he didn't think anything was wrong with the potion when he drank it. In a few seconds there was this great poof of purple smoke and the king, who was now a frog with a beard and glasses, sat on the throne. The great magician picked him up, went to the window, and dropped the foolish king into the moat."

"What happened then, Harry?" asked Hermione.

He shrugged. "I don't know. I didn't get any further."

"Let me try, then," said Draco eagerly. "How's this? The great magician then learned from the advisors that he inherited the kingdom because he was wise, and really smart, and he liked snakes which the old king never liked because he was dumb." Draco sniggered at his little pun. "Your turn, Hermione!"

Hermione's eyes widened. "Me? But, I... oh... okay. There was a twist, though, said the advisors. The great magician could only be the king forever if he found a queen who was beautiful, and smart, and..."

Draco interrupted, "...liked snakes!"

Hermione nodded. "Yes, she had to like snakes and books, because the great magician liked books, too. So, he traveled to far and distant lands to find his queen and when he did, and fell in love, he took her home where they became king and queen and everyone lived happily ever after!"

They all applauded each others efforts and then quieted as they went back to studying the koi. Hermione then asked out of the blue, "What do you think of that hearing so far?"

"Kind of funny," smirked Draco.

"It's noisy," huffed Harry as he leaned over and stuck his hand into the water in an attempt to pet a koi. "They're useless," he decreed when the koi splashed away. He then stood and went back to his father and leaned against him.

Snape glanced down at Harry's arrival. "Are you all right?"

"I was going to ask you the same thing, dad," smiled Harry, a bit warily. "All that stuff they said?"

"About your father?" Snape lowered his voice so the conversation would remain between them.

Harry nodded. "Was he really that mean to you?" Snape didn't answer right away and so Harry continued to speak in the void. "He sounded awful and I... I think I..." he gulped and scraped his sleeve across his nose.

Snape handed his son a handkerchief. "Keep your robes clean," he admonished gently. While he watched Harry wipe his lips and then blow his nose, he could tell that there was more that his son wanted to say, or to ask, but he didn't quite know how to put it.

Draping an arm over Harry's shoulder, he gave them a little squeeze. "James Potter was not a nice boy, Harry, but he grew up to be a good father. He loved you, and that's what matters."

"But you matter more, dad!" insisted Harry, shocking Snape. He knew that he would someday have to explain Potter's cruelties in school, and had decided upon the day of adoption, that as much as it might gall him, he would let Harry know that James Potter had grown up well and loved his son, and his wife.

"Why do I matter?" Snape asked, feeling a little dumb.

"Because you're my dad and it makes me feel sick to know that you were hurt as a kid. I..." he dropped his head against his father's upper arm as he closed his eyes in remembered pain. "I got hurt and it's not fun. It sticks with you and it makes you feel bad all the time. I think my father made you feel like that and it makes me... hate him for hurting you."

Snape lifted his boy's chin as it had fallen lower as he spoke. "Listen to me, Harry. You can be mad at Potter, but hate is something that is very Dark. You might think you hate him, but deep down," Snape pressed the palm of his hand to Harry's chest, "deep down in your

heart, you know that you love him. Despite everything he did that was bad you still love him."

Comprehension dawned on Harry's face as he asked, "Just like you love me forever and always, dad?"

"Just like that, Harry," Snape nodded, feeling that his son finally understood that no matter what he did, he wouldn't be returning to the Dursleys.

Harry nodded and sniffed. He then said firmly, "Okay, but I don't ever want anyone to hurt you again."

Snape gave Harry a one-armed hug and whispered against his forehead, "No one will, child. Not as long as I have you."

Going back to the hearing after lunch was an ordeal since Draco, Harry, and Hermione were more interested in the koi pond than listening to more hours of adults arguing. Snape didn't feel like going back either since a few of the members wanted more 'juicy details' about his years as a student. What had been revealed had been more than enough.

Lunch was nearly finished and the Board of Governors, who had also eaten at the cafeteria, huddled in small groups chatting with each other. All of them, including Lucius, had made a concerted effort to leave the Hogwarts staff and the students at peace during lunch.

With an order for his three Snakes to stay by the pond, Snape strode over to the Governor Superior and addressed him.

"Sir, I would like to request that my students be returned to Hogwarts," he began while Balor Thorn seemed to study him. "I could understand if the hearing were confined to the events surrounding Miss Granger, but there are... other topics being raised that young ears need not be bothered with."

Minerva, who had seen Snape wander over to where Thorn, Lucius, and Elba Twinnitch had stood together chatting, had followed. She added in her two cents. "The arguments and language being used by adults is something they shouldn't be exposed to either."



Balor Thorn considered for a moment before replying, "They may sit in the corridor outside the meeting hall. We would prefer them nearby if testimony is required."

Snape disagreed with that, but knew in an instant that opposing Thorn would be futile. He nodded and went to tell his charges where they would be for the remaining afternoon.

In the lowly lit corridor outside of the chamber in which the Board of Governors for Hogwarts was holding Minerva McGonagall's hearing, there were two bored children, and one reading a book by a hovering globe of white light.

Thump. Thump. Thumpity-thump. Thump. Thump. Thumpity-thump. Thump. Thump. Thumpity-thump.

"Stop it."

Hermione huffed, but continued to read.

Thump. Thump. Thumpity-thump. Thump. Thump. Thumpity-thump. Thump. Thump. Thumpity-thump.

"Stop it!"

Hermione glared at Harry who was the one banging his heels against the support under the bench they occupied.

Thump. Thump. Thumpity-thump. Thump. Thump. Thumpity-thump. Thump. Thump. Thumpity-thump. Thump. Thump. Thumpity-...

"OW!" Harry scowled sharply at Draco who smirked smugly after punching his friend in the shoulder.

"Quit being annoying!" demanded Draco.

"You could read," offered Hermione.

"Bleh," commented Harry. "Don't you get enough of that at school?"

"I'm not going to do homework when I didn't even go to classes," declared Draco righteously.

Hermione sniffed.

"Paper, scissors, rock?" asked Harry.

"What's that?"

For the next five minutes, Harry explained the game of Paper, scissors, rock to Draco. They then played the game.

Paper, scissors, rock began simply enough, but it quickly degenerated into Dragon, Blast-ended Skrewt, and House Elf. Harry and Draco roared, squealed, or shouted 'ka-pow' depending on what sort of mayhem was required. Soon, they were chasing each other, yelling like hooligans who never heard Hermione's admonishments to be quiet.

The door to the meeting chamber opened and a dark shadow filled the doorway. A barked, "Sit down and be quiet!" emanated from the silhouetted presence and as Harry and Draco quickly obeyed, the Dark Man vanished and the door slid shut behind him.

Hermione silently handed the boys two books, cast glowing lights over them, and went back to her reading.

"I wonder if there's anything else interesting here," mused Harry.

"Lots of things," replied Draco knowledgeably. "There's the big statue we passed in the reception area. It moves."

"Wicked!" breathed Harry.

"Read and be quiet," Hermione said firmly.

A few minutes passed. "We should have brought my Warlock Solomon Adventures books," sighed Draco wistfully.

Warlock Solomon was a character in a serialised book that was very like a comic book.

"Did you get the latest one, yet?" asked Harry who had become an instant convert, but had not asked his father for a subscription.

"I did. Want to know what happened?" Harry nodded eagerly and put down his book beside him. Draco launched into an excited recitation. "Well, you remember that Solomon was going after the evil Vampire Lord Singe?"

"He went on the magic sailing ship that flew through the clouds," added Harry. "To... uhm... the Land of Shadows?"

"Shades. The Land of Shades," corrected Draco. "So, he's flying the ship and then... there's this horrible red light that goes over the whole ship."

"That's not Lord Singe," gasped Harry.

"Nope!" Draco grinned. "You remember the Hag, Veldimina? And how Solomon trapped her in that cave of crystal?" Harry nodded. "Well, the Hag got out of the cave because some dumb Muggles went cave exploring and they didn't know that Solomon had put an enchanted crystal up to keep Veldimina trapped. They didn't know it was magic, just that it was pretty and they took it."

"She didn't hurt them, did she?" Harry asked worriedly.

Draco shook his head, "She Confunded them. Remember? Veldimina doesn't know she's really Warlock Solomon's girlfriend in the form of a Hag, so even though she seems bad, she can't bring herself to really hurt anyone."

"So Lord Singe is controlling her and he's going to make her hurt Solomon, right?" asked Harry.

"Yeah. So," Draco stood. "So, there's this red glow and the ship can't move and all the crew on the flying ship are falling asleep which is bad because Solomon's powerful, but he can't keep a whole ship in the air, and it's falling." Draco shrugged. "And that's where it ends."

"Ugh!" declared Harry. "That's terrible. Do you think Solomon's going to find a way out?"

Draco nodded. "He's pretty good. Maybe he'll find a way to counter the spell."

"Or the dragon Micklepaws will come and rescue him!" shouted Harry.

"Yeah! Micklepaws almost always shows up when it looks really bad. That might really happen, Harry." Draco said with absolute surety.

They both fell silent, then. Draco, already very bored with his book, started poking the hovering bit of light until it winked out.

Thump. Thump. Thumpity-thump. Thump. Thump. Thumpity-thump. Thump. Thump. Thumpity-thump.

"Stop it," growled Draco

Thump. Thump. Thumpity-thump. Thump. Thump. Thumpity-thump. Thump. Thump. Thumpity-thump.

"You're making my ears hurt, Harry!" Draco complained with his hands over his ears.

Thump. Thump. Thumpity-thump. Thump. Thump. Thumpity-thump. Thump. Thump. Thumpity-thump.

"STOP IT!"

No one heard the door snick open this time. Snape stood before the two boys, his height seeming much taller in the dim light, and Harry's hovering light cast the Dark Man's features into something from Warlock Solomon's Adventures book.

"What is the matter with the two of you?" Snape demanded impatiently.

"We're bored, dad," whined Harry.

"Do your homework," he ordered dryly.

"It's boring!" Draco also whined.

Snape was implacable. "Do your homework and keep your voices down," he hissed. "If I have to come out here a third time, you two will lose points and get detentions this weekend."

Both were horrified and gasped at the same time, "Quidditch!"

Snape gave them a thin, tight smile. "Maybe a threat to your practice will make you both behave." With that, he turned away, his robes billowing behind him, and vanished back into the chamber.

Resigned, both boys each let out a sigh of frustration, picked up their books and tried reading again.

Almost a half hour later, Harry griped, "Get off!"

"Huh? What?" Draco had fallen asleep and had drifted sideways until his head was on Harry's shoulder. He rubbed the sleep out of his eyes. "I'm thirsty."

"Me too," agreed Harry. "Hermione," asked Harry, "are you thirsty?"

"No," she answered placidly as she turned a page in her book.

"Yes you are," corrected Draco mischievously. He stood up and glanced to his right and then to his left. "I don't see any water fountains. Let's go."

Harry stood up, "C'mon, Hermione."

She glared over the edge of her book. "We shouldn't be going anywhere. What if they call us, or if Professor Snape comes to check on us?"

Draco huffed in exasperation. "They aren't going to do that! And, it's boring here, so let's just explore a bit, all right?"

"Yeah, Hermione. We don't have to go far," wheedled Harry. "Don't you maybe want to stretch or something?"

Hermione bit her lower lip and fingered the binding of her book as she tried to figure out what to do. "Well, I guess I'll go with you two, just in case."

"In case what?" asked Draco in puzzlement.

She stuffed her book into her bag and smiled, "In case you two get into mischief."

"We're Slytherins, Hermione," chuckled Harry. "We never get into mischief."

Draco sniggered, "We explore!"

It was rather surprising that the Silver Trio had no trouble traversing corridors and taking elevators hither and yon. It seemed that there were so many witches and wizards so concentrated on where they were going or where they'd come from that no one paid any attention to the explorers.

They'd found the pond in the cafeteria and spent some time there before looking for the animated statue they learned was called the Fountain of Magical Brethren at the center of the atrium just off the reception area.

The sculpture was a magnificent one of gold that depicted a wizard, a witch, a house elf, a Centaur, and a Goblin. The witch and wizard were obviously the focal point of the statue with the other three beings looking up with adoration. Hermione frowned in disapproval of the statue.

"That's not really accurate," she observed.

"Why?" asked Harry.

"Well, for one thing, there were the Goblin Wars that eventually led to the independence of the Goblins, and gave them power over the entire wizarding worlds banking system," Hermione educated.

Draco nodded. "Goblins don't much like wizards and witches."

"Griphook was nice enough to me," said Harry.

"I think if you're respectful of them, then you're okay," said Hermione.

"My father has never had any trouble with them," added Draco. "He says they like secrets."

"Dad says the Goblins will never reveal..." Hermione grabbed Harry's wrist sharply in warning. He glared at her. Draco also glared and Harry scowled right back. "I was going to say 'our secrets'."

Hermione's voice was hushed, "We shouldn't even be saying anything."

Draco nodded worriedly. "Maybe father ought to use a spell or something to make it so we can't."

"Let's ask about that when we get back." Harry turned away from the statue. "Let's go see what's down there." His curiosity piqued, he led his friends into following three adults that wore black hooded robes that shimmered as they moved.

Harry, Draco, and Hermione shouldn't have gotten so deep into the Ministry, but it was a fact that witches and wizards in that building didn't think to question a group of children that seemed not to get into any mischief. So, before they knew it, they were well and truly lost.

Hermione looked at the oddly curved walls that gleamed deep, dark, grey. She sighed. "I think we've been here before."

"No we haven't," Draco insisted, but he frowned worriedly at the corridor.

"Are you sure?" asked Harry. He touched the wall and grimaced at its sort of slimy feel. "How come there aren't any signs that tell you where you are?"

"I think there are," mused Draco, "but they don't appear, maybe, unless you want them."

"Well, I'd like a stupid sign!" he announced to the corridor.

To their surprise letters began to form over their head. Hermione read them, "Corridor 13, level 13 – Department of Mysteries."

Three sets of eyes widened in awe. "What's the Department of Mysteries?" asked Hermione.

"It's a mystery!" Draco chuckled to himself.

Hermione glared at Draco. Harry frowned. "Maybe those guys we saw in the shiny cloaks work there."

The Siren song of Curiosity that had long been the bane of parents and had teased children for millenia, curled up around Harry's senses. The little warning that his father might not appreciate his explorations in the next few minutes tried to get through the song, and might have succeeded if it hadn't been for another force that lay hidden deep down in the Department of Mysteries. A force that even the shimmery black-clad Unspeakables did not entirely understand. Once Harry was irrevocably under its spell, it drifted over to Draco.

Draco had always been one to listen to his Curiosity, but his father had taught him, from the time he could walk, to be cautious about where he stepped. It was good training, and it was similar to what Harry had learned through instinct. However, with the force weaving a tantalising spell that no child could resist, Draco had moved beside Harry just as his friend was moving forward down the eerie corridor. The last for Curiosity and the stronger force of magic to enthrall was Hermione.

Hermione's every sense was screaming at her to turn around and run. She watched her friends moving down the corridor as terror swept up from her feet to her heart like a tidal wave. An ancient magic, contained, yet not controlled, warred with the child's common sense as it swirled around her. Had any of the Unspeakables been nearby, they would have seen the threatening aura of red magic that circled her like a growing tornado. It was pushing at her and doing its best to send her after her friends.

At some point, Hermione tried yelling at Harry and Draco. An angry flash of red that sparked off her friends whipped out from them and slithered like a living, bloody vine at horrific speed towards her.

She didn't know she'd had her wand out yet there it was, raised as her arm shook and tears spilled unbidden down her cheeks. Hermione needed to cast a spell. Any spell she knew would help. Anything! Her body trembled with the tension of her magical core trying to battle against what was an invading force. Finally she cried out the first spell she'd learned.

"Wingardium Leviosa!"

The red vine of magic splintered into fantastic, tiny shards of glitter and the release was so palpable that Hermione was thrown



backwards. Shaking her head, she realised she couldn't see her friends anymore.

Hermione scrambled onto her feet and began running the way they'd come. She didn't know the path she was following, she just ran. She was being guided by the self-preservation of her youthful accidental magic.

As Hermione ran, a few magical folk watched her speed on by, but no one stopped her, no one questioned whether or not there was something wrong. In her wake, all was back to business as usual in the Ministry.

Snape was now officially bored, bored, and really bored. The governors had finally dropped their inquiries into the Marauders and were keeping their arguments to the present.

The Potions Master never knew of a group of men and women who could argue as much as the Board did.

He wished, oh how he wished, that Balor Thorn would end all of this and hand down a decision so he could go.

Snape was to discover that making such fervent wishes wasn't entirely smart.

Hermione burst through the door, her wand drawn and in a white knuckled death grip. A few of the Board members grouched at the interruption, but the fear that radiated off of the child made all of them forget, for the moment, why they were there.

Snape leapt out of his chair and over to Hermione as his heart rose up in its own fear as he wondered where Harry and Draco were.

Lucius, who had been the most composed, next to the Governor Superior, followed Snape as his own heart worked to beat its way out of his chest as he, too, thought of his son and of Harry.

Snape skidded to a sudden halt as Hermione's body grew whip-wire taut and she aimed her wand at him. She wouldn't have been able to cast any spells, but the instinct to halt when a wand was pointed at one, was a muscle deep response. When Snape's brain caught

up and told him it was safe to approach the girl, he did so, dropping to his knee and grasping her upper arms.

"Where's Draco and Harry?" he asked sharply.

"What have you three been up to?" demanded Lucius.

"Be quiet!" hissed Snape with enough venom that Lucius, and anyone else behind him, took a cautious step back.

"It's g-g-got them," Hermione stuttered. Snape could feel tremors beginning in her muscles and was afraid she might go into shock. "W-w-w-we were exploring... got l-l-lost...Harry wanted a s-s-s-sign."

Snape took her chin in his thumb and forefinger as her eyes started to become glassy and wandering as though she were seeing something else. "Hermione. Look at me. Hermione!"

Hermione's wand clattered to the ground as her fingers suddenly let go. Lucius quietly summoned the wand to him, but kept watch. The child's hands then gripped Snape's shoulders tightly, the fabric of his robes bunching up in her fists. Her gaze locked with his as she said softly, "We were lost. Harry said we needed a sign." She lowered her face closer to Snape's and intoned in a dull voice, "Corridor 13, level 13 – Department of Mysteries."

A/N: The heat here is getting tough and so that meant I couldn't work on this chapter as much as I wanted. It is done, though, and I hope you enjoy it. In the next chapter this cliffhanger will be resolved, and then it is Halloween. Will a troll go missing? We shall see.

Thank you to aliengirlguy for Dumblefrog.

A very good question was asked about the last chapter in how could Lily cast a spell the same time that Voldy did. I used the fact that when one is in danger, adrenaline is high and senses, muscles, nerves, are ready for action. I think Lily had her spell ready for any eventuality and since it seems it takes just the tiniest bit of time to say Avada Kedavra, she could, very likely have caught a tell – a body language hint – that the Killing Curse was going to be cast, and so she cast her spell, thus protecting Harry.

A Mother's protection, whether witch or Muggle, can be a very powerful thing.

Monday afternoon, Oct. 28, 1991

Harry and Draco were both silent as they walked soundlessly down the strange, grey corridor until they were led through a rather drab looking door of unstained oak that was no taller than they were. For a moment they stood, staring, as though they awaited some silent instruction. After a few seconds Draco jerked slightly and then he touched the door. There was a series of clicks, then a snick, and then the door silently glided open to admit them.

There was no one to see the two tears that fell from Draco's eyes to the highly polished, black marble floor.

The two small boys entered an incredible chamber that was narrow, yet seemed to stretch endlessly ahead of them. On either side of them were impossibly tall shelves of silver. Each shelf held orbs that glowed softly in many colours. Their meagre light barely illuminated their spot upon the shelf.

There was thousands, upon thousands of these orbs.

Harry walked with unerring purpose down the center aisle, his green gaze glazed over. Beside him, Draco continued to walk, but his footsteps, once smooth, were becoming uneven, jerking at times and almost making him fall as the Compulsion Spell that had been directing him was fading. At one point, he did stumble to his knees.

"Har... ry!" his voice was full of fear which only worsened as his friend whirled angrily upon him. His viridian gaze faded sharply to an angry maroon, and with strength that wasn't his, Harry gripped Draco's upper arm and dragged him to his feet.

Harry suddenly let go of his friend and he let out a gasp. The maroon glare was gone and his own, normal green gaze was momentarily back. He rasped, "I... can't... just..." he drew in an agony of breath and managed to blurt, "do what he says, Draco!"

The angry red glare was back and before Draco could rear back, his upper arm was gripped tightly again and Harry was pulling him further into the depths of the chamber of orbs.

After what felt like an eternity, or long enough for Draco's fingers to tingle painfully from Harry's grip, the two boys stopped at one shelf.

Harry had his malevolent eyes upon one orb that pulsed sluggishly with a greenish light. He tried to reach for it, but he was just an inch too short.

"Get it for me!" demanded Harry in a voice that was much more grown-up than his and had a haunting, sibilant, whispery quality to it.

"You-you-you're hurting me, Harry," Draco gasped even as his mind's voice, which sounded so much like his father's, warned him to keep quiet.

Harry did not take his eyes off the orb, but that scary, whispery voice hardened to steel and ordered, "Give me that orb or I'll kill you."

With tears streaming down his cheeks, Draco stretched up for the orb Harry was staring at intently. He was just barely able to brush it with his fingers. He relaxed and tried a second time to stretch further. He let out a whimper as his fingers ineffectually moved the sphere just a bit more out of his reach.

"Get it!" hissed that awful voice from Harry.

"I'm trying!" Draco blubbered. A third stretch only proved that the orb was tantalisingly beyond his fingers. A fourth try made Draco break out in an frustrated sob. He then let out a screech as Harry's wand was suddenly and painfully jabbed into his neck.

Harry had, at first, felt soothed by the spell in the odd corridor, and that was probably his undoing. As he was caught, he felt himself dragged away from his body and slammed into a cage. Harry couldn't see it, but he was able to feel the cage that trapped him. He also knew that something else, something scary and evil had his body.

The boy tried to yell, to beat his fists against his invisible prison. He even jumped and then threw himself against it. That was when he noticed it was getting smaller. Afraid of being crushed, he didn't move.

Harry waited, it seemed, like an aeon within his mind and his prison, but in truth it was only seconds. Out of the murky darkness something cold and bony touched his hand. He yanked his hand

away and shuddered as the voice of his nightmares caressed his ear and ordered, "Look."

A blink of his eyes cleared his vision, and as though he were peering through two, narrow tunnels Harry could see outside his mind and into the terror stricken, grey eyes of his best friend. The awful voice laughed beside him as Harry screamed out Draco's name.

Suddenly, the invisible cage whirled sickeningly and Harry found himself face to face with the monster. Bleached white, ashen dead skin, a cruel, bloodless and thin mouth, a hideous flattened nose that looked as though it had the skin and cartilage stripped away like the nose on a skull, and red, red, burning bloody red eyes that captured him in their spell.

This was the monster from the Forbidden Forest. This was the monster from his vision nightmares. This was the monster that had, for so very long, been silent and waiting for little Harry Potter. As scared as Harry felt, his terror gnawed harder at him when he saw the fear in his best friend's eyes and that was worse than the monster.

Harry struggled against the bars of his prison. He no longer cared that they were tightening on him. He had to get through to Draco.

"I can't stop him! Just do what he says, Draco!" Harry screamed at the top of his lungs. The monster swayed, like a cobra, laughing at Harry as he was crushed down into an uncomfortable crouch.

"There!" the monster declared, and then he was distracted.

Harry was frightened and he wanted his daddy, but it was only him and he had to help Draco. Although the monster hadn't said what his plans were, Harry could feel its intent radiate off his bleached skin like a fever. The monster was going to kill Draco. In his mind's eye he saw a very old memory of sickly green light and heard a woman scream. Harry's heart clenched with the knowledge that the monster was going to use that green light on Draco.

Calming himself, just as his dad had taught him during their Occlumency lessons at night, Harry began to breathe and to imagine his muscles relaxing. He soon slipped easily into a trance-like state that allowed him to envision his growing Occlumency shield.

Harry had chosen a garden that continued to bloom, to grow, and to expand with each lesson. His memories were flowers, or herbs, or trees. Many were things one would never see in a Muggle or wizard garden because Harry had made them up. Vines of lavender and deep purple flowers ran everywhere, upon trees, across the ground until they trailed to a silver pond.

The pond usually held the most fearsome fish Harry ever could have imagined. These fish were toothsome, and had the look of something grey and desiccated about them. Harry did not like them. He also knew that this pond was where the monster would live when he was not dreaming.

Standing guard over the pond was a statue of pure white marble. When he was a little boy still living in his cupboard, he had thought the statue was his angel since it had beautiful wings, but now he knew, from what he'd seen at his adoption ceremony, that the statue was his mother.

As he stretched his hand towards the statue he knew that he had to put the monster back into the pond.

Suddenly the water began to bubble and to Harry's surprise the silver water lowered until it was all gone.

"No!" he cried out. How was he going to put the monster back now?

Something faint, like a cool breeze, yet welcoming, touched Harry's hair, making it drift slightly.

Understanding bloomed and Harry nodded. He had been hiding the monster for a long time because he wasn't strong enough to get rid of it. Thinking of his first friend who needed him to be strong, Hermione, and finally of his Dark Man who rescued him and gave him a family, he closed his eyes tightly, willing the monster out of his head and away from Draco.

Draco scrambled away just as he heard Harry's wand clattering to the floor. He snatched it up as it rolled towards him and pointed it at his friend. "St-st-stup...!"

White light exploded from Harry's scar making Draco slide all the way across the floor into the lowest shelf of orbs opposite from the tall shelf he'd been trying to reach for Harry. The shelf wavered and dozens of orbs fell to the ground and shattered releasing a hundred, muted voices. Draco didn't hear them as he watched in fascinated horror as the white, silvery light coming from Harry's scar dragged a squirming mist of grey with it. The little boy felt sick at seeing the grey mist and gagged.

Harry slowly dropped to his knees, his face, which had been stretched into an awful grimace as he silently screamed, was now relaxed, and as the last of the two wisps faded, he closed his eyes and drifted to the floor. His head bumped the shelf and the orb that Draco had been trying to reach wobbled on the edge where his fingers had pushed it, and then fell. It hit Harry's head squarely and shattered. Draco listened as a tremulous voice intoned a prophecy.

"The one with the power to vanquish the Dark Lord approaches...Born to those who have thrice defied him, born as the seventh month dies...and the Dark Lord will mark him as his equal, but he will have power the Dark Lord knows not...and either must die at the hand of the other for neither can live while the other survives..."

"The Hall of Prophecy?" Lucius thundered. "How in Merlin's name did they get there?"

"Shut up, Lucius!" ordered Snape. Hermione's shaking had taken over her entire body and he had pulled her close in an effort to stop it.

"Severus!" Minerva interrupted firmly. "Give her to me. You and Lucius need to get your sons." Minerva held out her arms for the child.

Snape was torn, he had to go after his son, but Hermione was one of his Snakes and she needed him, too. She had yet to let go of his robes and they were all askew as he tried to keep holding her.

"Severus," said Dumbledore soothingly, and to Snape's chagrin, that soft, cajoling voice was a balm to his soul and he listened. "Give Minerva the girl. She'll take her to Poppy. You need to get to Harry



and Draco. There are too many dangers in the Department of Mysteries and the Hall of Prophecy is one of them."

Tonks, still holding a small hand mirror she'd been speaking quietly into, stepped up to them. "Corridor 13, Level 13 is just above the Death Chamber but somehow they wound up in the Hall of Prophecy." Tonks frowned and consulted the mirror a last time and a very faint, tinny voice could be heard. "Yes, sir," she replied to the faint voice and then looked up. Her expression, though schooled to reflect calm, was filled with trepidation. "I'm supposed to escort you, so come on!"

Snape and Lucius broke into a run, following right behind Nymphadora Tonks.

"DRACO!" Lucius' voice echoed from what seemed to be very far away.

"Papa?" sniffled Draco.

"HARRY!" the familiar voice of his Head of House echoed also.

Draco wasn't sure whether or not the voices were real, but then something bumped his elbow. He looked down and was fascinated to see a small, misty white, silver spotted fawn that was nudging his elbow as if to tell him he needed to speak louder. He watched in awe as it ambled over to Harry and then lay down, folding itself against the unconscious boy's side.

Gathering his courage, his voice squeakily shouted, "P-p-p-papa?" He couldn't hold back the sob that burbled from him. It was part relief, part anxiety.

Lucius heard his son and caught Snape's arm by his sleeve. "This way! Draco!"

Both men broke into a run towards another call from Draco. They soon found both boys.

Snape skidded to a halt staring down at the fawn that had its chin on Harry's thigh.

"Dragon, don't move!" ordered Lucius as he looked down at the sea of broken glass surrounding his son. Draco was unaware of it, but the child was bleeding from at least a dozen cuts on his hands and face. Draco's clothing had protected him from the rest of the glass.

Lucius flourished his wand and soon his son was floating above the broken orbs and over to his father. Another spell vanished the remaining pieces of glass from Draco's robes and then Lucius enfolded his son into his arms.

Draco was trembling violently and held so tightly onto his father Lucius knew he'd have bruises later from the small fingers. He turned and stared down at what had frozen his friend.

He couldn't believe what he was seeing. "Is it a Patronus?" whispered Lucius. Snape nodded as he slowly knelt down by his son.

"It came f-f-f-from Harry's scar," Draco spoke from his father's chest but he'd turned his head slightly to see his friend. "It took this awful l-l-l-looking grey... thing... from his head." He pressed his head back against his father's chest as his body gave a repugnant shudder.

Snape held out his hand towards the fawn who stood, butted its head affectionately against his palm, and then faded away. Turning to Harry the concerned father frowned at the blood trickling from the rune-shaped scar, and several other small cuts upon his face. Scourgifying the broken glass, he collected Harry's limp body into his arms, and draped part of his cloak over him.

Tonks had intended to follow the two wizards into the Hall of Prophecy, but she had unfortunately tripped and they were gone by the time she had righted herself. She started to go inside when a heavy hand touched her back. She spun around, not falling this time, and was face to... well hood... with two Unspeakables in their shimmering black robes.

Tonks quickly gathered herself and addressed the two hooded, shimmery black clad Unspeakables.

"My name is Junior Auror Tonks and I was sent..."

She was quickly interrupted by one of the Unspeakables raising a hand. The other removed the hood to reveal herself as a witch with

amber eyes and dark brown hair. The witch looked past Tonks towards the two wizards with their sons in their arms. She met them as they came through the door. Once Lucius and Severus were clear of the plain door, the Unspeakable waved her hand and the door contracted and then expanded, sealing itself against all intruders, wary and unwary.

"Why was that door not sealed before?" Snape demanded.

"It always is," commented the woman. "A power greater than ours opened it, though." She pointed down at Snape's son. "He did."

"My son is just a child! He could not have had the power to open it!" Snape declared vehemently.

The hooded Unspeakable waved a gloved hand over Harry in a graceful set of movements. When he/she was finished the witch leaned towards her silent companion.

Snape had very good hearing yet was unable to discern what they were saying to each other. The witch spoke solemnly, "My companion has detected the residue of a Fiend within your son." Very lightly the witch reached towards Harry's scar. Her fingers hovered over it, but she did not touch him or the scar.

The Potions Master watched her warily. The Unspeakables were a sect of witches and wizards that were neutral within the politics of the wizarding world. Their sole existence dealt with those questions hidden within the Department of Mysteries of which the Hall of Prophecy was but many. They were alternately revered, shunned, and feared because they had access to magic that not even Voldemort could ever hope to possess. Snape knew there were those who worried that if ever an Unspeakable broke his or her Oath of Neutrality, the wizarding world could face a threat even more dangerous than that of the Dark Lord.

Snape wasn't pleased with the odd attention Harry was getting from the Unspeakables but he was unwilling to confront the witch and her companion.

"Look." The Unspeakable woman drew everyone's attention to the gradual appearance of Harry's aura. It was a vibrant purple. Coiled around it was the tattered remains of a spotty, diseased looking aura.

"Merlin's ghost!" exclaimed Lucius as he stared and watched the purple aura slowly devouring the sickly one.

"Auras," whispered Snape with a touch of horror. He had seen Voldemort's aura, once, the night he'd been given the Dark Mark. The Dark wizard's aura had latched onto Snape's and had been, just as it was now, a diseased looking thing, a maelstrom of greys and vicious red. It was not something Snape had ever wanted to see again, especially not around his son.

A third aura of pure white snaked out from beneath the purple that was Harry's aura and twisted around the grey, squeezing the last filaments from it until it was slowly gone from their view.

"The grey was the residue of the Fiend, the Dark Spirit, or demon wraith," enlightened the witch. "Your son expended a great deal of magic in forcing it from him. His aura is now cleansing what is left, and healing him."

Snape hefted his son a bit more comfortably in his arms. "I think he cast a Patronus."

"It would make sense," the Unspeakable witch said. "Fiends are much like Dementors, although stronger in that they can possess one." She moved a bit closer to Snape and his son. Again her fingers hovered over his scar. "May I?"

"Will it...?" he began but was interrupted.

"Severus!" it was Dumbledore and behind him was Balor Thorn. "They won't hurt Harry!" Snape glared at the older wizard's assumption.

Thorn stepped near the witch. "Samara? What's going on?"

The still hooded Unspeakable whispered to the witch. The witch nodded, then faced them. She held up her other hand to forestall anymore interruptions. Then, very gently, she brushed her fingers over Harry's scar. The boy hitched and jerked sharply in Snape's arms. The Potions Master automatically tightened his hold so he wouldn't drop his son.

Samara, the Unspeakable witch sighed as she drew her hand away. "The mark of a Mother's magic strengthened by Earth and Rune magic," she said with a slight inflection of admiration. "Nearly perfect."

"It is a curse scar," interjected the Headmaster. The witch turned sharply, her expression one of annoyance towards the bald ignorance of another. She then turned away, facing Harry and his father again.

"The Fiend found a flaw in the Ancient magic," she intoned. Thorn grimaced. "Fear. Rejection. Pain." Her head canted to the left slightly in contemplation. "A child's desire to be powerful over those that caused the pain."

Snape's arms pulled Harry closer to his chest. Snape knew what the witch was saying. He shuddered with inward rage as he learned how the spirit of Voldemort had found a vulnerability in his son.

Harry had been hurt, abused by those who should have loved, cared for, and protected him. The child's long time fear of his relatives combined with the desire to have some sort of power, or someone of power, that would hurt them back had been enough to crack the nearly impenetrable protective barrier that Lily had cast upon her son.

Fear, and the need to extract revenge upon those that had hurt you – Snape knew this feeling all too well. It was fear, hatred even of Tobias Snape, of James Potter and Sirius Black. He had wanted to hurt all of them the way they'd hurt him, and it had led him into the hands of the Dark Lord who had promised him revenge.

What few knew was that Voldemort had understood such fear and hatred, and the need for revenge as well. It was his... power... and he used it, many times to excess, against his enemies and even his followers.

Foolish Dumbledore, who believed that adversity would strengthen Harry by giving him to relatives who would not coddle him, had instead given the Dark Lord just what he needed to return.

Albus Dumbledore had given Voldemort the way to return.

Lucius had gone to Malfoy Manor after having Madame Pomfrey look over Draco who had fallen into a heavy sleep sometime during their encounter with the Unspeakables. The boy's emotions were worn out and he was exhausted both mentally and physically. Poppy had spelled a few potions into the sleeping boy and then sent them home with a few doses of Dreamless Sleep Potion.

Harry still had not come out of his own exhausted sleep, so Snape had left his son in the Infirmary while he went to the Headmaster's office to meet with Dumbledore. It was a meeting that was already proving difficult and Snape was having a hard time keeping himself from hexing the aged fool.

"Are you so obtuse that you have no idea what you have done, Albus?" Snape asked angrily.

Dumbledore was seated by the fire, composed, not a bit ruffled at the knowledge of the results of his decisions concerning one, Harry Potter. "Severus. Do sit down. You're wearing a hole in my carpet."

Inwardly he growled at the Headmaster's blase' attitude. It had been like this upon his arrival and Snape was seriously beginning to wonder if the old wizard had even an inkling as to what his actions in placing Harry with his relatives had done to Lily's protective spell.

The Headmaster summoned an elf to bring them tea. Once it had arrived, he spoke quietly, "What I have done is what I've always had to do, Severus." He handed Snape a cup of tea to keep him from protesting. "I never expected you to blindly agree with me, Severus, but since you came to me, I did expect you to stand with me."

Snape froze with the teacup just in front of his lips. He felt as though his world was starting to tip and instead of snarking some remark back sarcastically, he held his tongue and listened as he wondered just how in the blazes this was being turned back on him.

Dumbledore's watery eyes captured his. "I gave you my trust, my boy. In turn, you claimed Harry publicly without consulting me..."

Snape interrupted flatly. "Considering the fact that Harry is my biological son, I was not aware this was something I had to ask your permission for." He gave the older wizard a slow sneer.

Dumbledore's gaze hardened, "Don't play games with me, Severus. You knew that Voldemort was returning. It was pain through your Dark Mark that confirmed this. In claiming Harry you have shown to me how selfish a Slytherin can be." Dumbledore did not give the Potions Master a chance to retaliate at the insult before he said, "Did you really believe that when Voldemort returned I would not need you as before?"

"I was aware of that," Snape replied, his voice as hard as the Headmaster's unwavering gaze. Inwardly, he stung at the cold insult and he felt his heart turn to ice. "However, it was you that assumed I would happily traipse on back to the Dark Lord's side. This, even after you proclaimed, and testified before the Wizengamot and the entire wizarding world that I was your 'most trusted spy'." He snorted and slammed down his teacup upon the saucer, shattering them both. "Did you never stop to think that Voldemort would gladly send back my traitorous heart to you?"

Dumbledore eyed a splotch of blood that dripped from Snape's thumb to his thigh to soak into his trousers. "Severus, you're bleeding."

Snape ignored the elder wizard, still angry, and rose sharply to his feet, the remaining pieces of crockery falling to the floor, the blood still dripping sluggishly from his thumb. The lack of expression on the Headmaster's face infuriated him. "How the bloody hell would I have been any use to you or my son, then, you manipulative, old, bastard? You know the promise I made to Lily and to Harry. A binding promise to keep him safe. Nowhere! Not one bloody word in my promise declares that I'll die for you or the damned wizarding world, Albus!"

"Sit! Down!" Dumbledore's Voice thundered.

Snape's resistance was formidable, but shock of the Headmaster yelling at him, combined with the influencing magic of his Voice, slammed the Potions Master back into his chair, jarring his spine. The impact ignited a migraine right behind his eyes. Habit made him close his eyes against the pain. Peripherally he was aware of a soft shushing of robes and then felt the old man's withered hand lifting his injured one. A spell cleansed the wound and a second one healed it.

The kind action was a painful reminder of the many times Snape had returned from the Dark Lord's meetings and found himself being healed by the Headmaster, just like this. The man's gentility was undermining the distrust and anger he'd been harboring for the last several months.

Hoping beyond hope that maybe his words, his vexation he'd just vented had held some impact upon the older wizard, Snape opened his eyes. Unfortunately, he managed to catch, just a breath's glimpse of a calculating glimmer in Dumbledore's eyes. That glimmer vanished into the compassionate twinkle so many were familiar with when he realised the younger wizard had opened his eyes. It had been a quick transition, but not so quick that Snape's well-trained gaze hadn't caught it. He pulled his hand from Dumbledore's and glared.

"I never demanded your death, my boy," replied Dumbledore sadly. "What I expected was that you would begin to ingratiate yourself with your old associates. I had thought with Lucius..." he shook his head. "It seems his family has come before his need for power."

Snape smirked. Anyone who didn't know the patrician would not know that the power Lucius influenced both in the wizarding and Muggle worlds since his father's fortunate death was far greater than any magic Voldemort wielded.

Voldemort's lure, back then, had been the thinly promised riches and the power of ancient and forgotten magic. Once he had trapped a willing subject to take his Mark, the truth of the Dark Lord's mad desires became clear: the slaughter of innocents to purge the world of Muggles, Muggle-borns, and half-bloods. That was Abraxas Malfoy's desire but not the desire of the son.

Lucius enjoyed the cultivation of contacts for various needs. Many were legitimate, but there were shady ones, too, many gathered during his time as a Death Eater, that he still kept in his pocket for when needed.

For Lucius, the restoration of the Malfoy honor was a lofty and worthy goal. It was important to him that his son grow up looking up to him with love, not fear, as he had looked upon his own father. It was important to him to be a good husband who genuinely loved his wife, and her only. Their marriage was strong despite vicious



rumours (slowly dying away) of Lucius supposed infidelities and that his appetites were worse even than those of Abraxas.

Snape thought that Lucius and Narcissa were positively annoying, sometimes, with their affection for each other! They were worse the few times they attempted to be matchmakers for the Potions Master.

"Perhaps you forget, Albus, that a man finds it difficult to face adversity if there is nothing to fight for," he retorted staunchly. "Harry is my son. Did you think once I claimed him that there was nothing I would not do to keep him safe?"

Dumbledore lifted his head, his gaze piercing Snape's sharply, "That goes without saying, doesn't it, Severus?"

Snape slowly shook his head, "No. I think it has to be said. You need to know, Albus, that I am aware there are forces we cannot begin to comprehend surround..." He glared as he saw a familiar flash in the Headmaster's eyes. "I am not speaking of that bloody prophecy so do not dare to bring it up!"

Dumbledore did dare and spoke insistently, "I realise you choose not to believe it, Severus, but you must understand that Voldemort did believe it. His belief marked Lily, James, and Harry."

"And it marks my soul as well, Merlin be damned!" Snape shouted. "Their deaths forever stain my soul because of that bloody prophecy and I will not have it haunting my son! I will find a way to ultimately destroy him. Not my son, not my child!"

"Stop your shouting," Dumbledore ordered wearily. His slim fingertips massaged his forehead briefly, then he said, "Voldemort used your son to try and get the Prophecy, Severus. You are aware of that?"

Snape glowered darkly. "Do you take me for an ignorant fool, Albus? We found them in the wretched Hall of Prophecy. Regardless of what Voldemort believes or you believe, Harry will not become some martyred sacrifice for the cause of Light because of it."

A long and uneasy silence stretched between the two implacable wizards as they sat opposite each other. The flames crackled warmly and the pine logs burned sweetly.

Dumbledore stood and walked over to Snape and looked down upon him. "Whatever your feelings are towards me, now, my boy, wouldn't you rather have me on your side than against you? Are you so certain that you and Lucius can do this on your own?"

Snape looked up at the old man, a bit surprised to not hear the inflection of Voice Magic trying to worm its way into him via the wizard's words. Snape didn't want Dumbledore to be an enemy, but there was so much that the old man had done to Harry, and to himself...

"Are you declaring yourself my enemy, Albus?" Snape asked wearily.

The Headmaster drew in a deep breath and shook his head. "I am not, my boy."

"I do not wish to have you as an enemy, Albus, but..." as he hesitated, he curled one hand into a fist, allowing the nails to bite into the vulnerable flesh of his palm. Quietly he then said, "But, Harry is my son. I will not allow even you to bring harm to him."

The twinkle in the Headmaster's eyes returned a bit too quickly for Snape's comfort as the man denied, "I have never meant to harm the boy!"

"Whether you meant it or not, your negligence allowed him to be starved and beaten and left to grow up in a cupboard," Snape's voice was hard and unforgiving.

Snape chose not to mention that Dumbledore's duplicitous nature had deceived the Ministry over guardianship of Harry, and that the wizard's manipulation had all but erased the once great fortune of the Potters leaving Harry with just enough galleons to pay for school, robes, and supplies. It struck Snape, all too suddenly, like a blow to his gut, that it was possible there was only that much left in the boy's vault because the Headmaster never expected Harry to live beyond his seventh school year. Such a theory made him slightly ill.

The Headmaster sighed sadly and returned to his chair where he sat down, picked up his cold tea, and looked down at the patterns left by the tea leaves. "So, I have lost you, then, Severus?"

Snape had dreams where he'd triumphantly put the Headmaster in his place. Dreams where he'd told the man just how betrayed by him he felt, yet, he couldn't. Not because he felt sorry for the older wizard, but because he was Slytherin and a Snake never burned a bridge until it was no longer needed. For good or ill, Dumbledore did have the admiration, and love of many in the wizarding world, which Snape did not. Since the small blurb in The Daily Prophet declaring that Harry was his son, Snape had turned to ash a fair amount of Howlers that nosy wizards and witches felt were their right to send in order to shout their indignation that a Death Eater was father to the wizarding world's hero.

"The Light has not lost me," Snape emphasised. "Above all, my son's well-being comes before Dark Wizards, Death Eaters, and Philosophers Stones." He did not say, having implied it before, that Harry's well-being also came before that of certain meddlesome Headmaster.

Snape rose from his chair feeling bone weary after this day. Leaving the Headmaster's office, he went to the Infirmary to check on Miss Granger, and to do some thinking.

Monday, Oct. 28, 1991- Late that evening

After visiting with Hermione and finding that his son was awake in the Infirmary, though looking grey, and unfortunately haunted, he escorted his son not to Harry's dorm, but to his quarters deep within the dungeons.

Harry hadn't slept before in his father's quarters and Snape was all prepared to Transfigure the sofa into a bed for his son. As he was fetching an extra pillow, sheets, and a coverlet, he was surprised to discover that his quarters now had an extra room.

Cautiously he opened the door to find a well-furnished room with a large, roll-top desk of oak, a four poster bed also of oak with a canopy of deep green curtains, an oak wardrobe, a small fireplace, and an enchanted window overlooking Hagrid's hut. The enchanted window was set into a perfect nook that allowed for a nice, wide window seat.

On the floor of the room was a deep pile rug in green and blue and the walls were decorated with wood paneled oak Wainscoting and satin cream wallpaper.

Snape scowled as he wondered if the bedroom was some sort of misguided peace offering from the Headmaster. With a shrug, he decided not to question it at the moment. He had meant to ask the house elves to provide his son with a room, but as usual, other business intervened.

Harry, still looking shell-shocked and far too quiet, sat meekly upon his father's sofa staring into the flames of the fireplace. Snape had urged his son from the couch and was more than pleased at his son's reaction to the bedroom.

Even if Dumbledore did create the room, for the bloom of colour in Harry's cheeks, and the smile on his face, Snape would thank him. IF the Headmaster was the one behind the bedroom's creation.

Snape had watched from the doorway as Harry explored his room. His fingers brushed over the furniture, the canopy curtain, the soft blue and green quilt, and he even kicked off his shoes and took off his socks so he could burrow his feet into the thick carpet.

Harry had been so obviously delighted with his room, it had thawed some of the horror that had so frozen him since that afternoon at the Ministry. It allowed Snape to sit beside Harry after he Transfigured his robes into pyjamas and lit the small fireplace, and ask him what he could remember happening.

The two wizards made themselves comfortable on the wide bed, with pillows supporting Snape's back and Harry curled up against his father's side.

The eleven year old didn't want to think about the day, but even he had to admit it was still too fresh in his mind. It sat upon his thoughts like something slimy and reminded him all too well of his nightmarish visions of the unicorns and the centaurs. The voice of the monster still raked obscenely over his sense memory. Lacing his own small fingers with the long, slim ones of his father's he began to speak in a voice that was, at first, wooden sounding.

"I really didn't think anything was wrong, at first. I just wanted to keep exploring and it felt like something was... was tickling me. And then, I was trapped and there was this cage around me and everytime I fought it got smaller and smaller. When the monster let me see Draco..." Harry shuddered and curled his feet up under himself. Snape drew him tighter to his side. "Dad, he was so scared and I couldn't do anything." His face turned to look up at his father. "The monster was going to kill him and I could see just how he was going to do it, too. With that green light."

Snape swallowed convulsively and paled considerably. If his son had killed Draco it would have destroyed him. No matter that he was helpless, Harry's guilt would have eaten him alive. For a brief moment, Snape was irrationally afraid for what-might-have-been. With his other hand he carded his fingers through his son's hair.

"Harry, you did help Draco. Do you remember how you did?" asked Snape carefully.

Harry shifted so he could better see his father's eyes and the warmth within the inky blackness. "The Occlumency, I think. I just made myself calm down because I think me being afraid and all that was just making things worse." He frowned in thought. "I think the monster liked that. I mean, he liked that I was afraid."

"No doubt he was," agreed Snape. "Voldemort thrived upon the fear he caused in others."

Harry nodded and leaned his cheek against the side of his father's chest. "I've been building a... uhm... a garden for Occlumens. I never could get rid of the pool with the evil fish, though."

"What pool is that?" Snape asked warily. He could guess what it might be, but he wouldn't.

"When I was really little, like about three years old, I made the pool because he wouldn't leave my dreams alone. That's when the angel... I mean mum, first showed up." A small smile curved his lips. "Mum's this statue watching over the pond with great big wings. She helped keep the evil fish in the pond and then I wouldn't have those bad dreams." He sighed heavily. "I think it got harder for her when I got older. Maybe that's why I have those visions..." his voice trailed off and Snape looked down to see his son staring into the flames.

The hollow, haunted expression was that of a boy both too young and too old. It worried the concerned father.

Snape slipped off the bed, Summoned a pair of his slippers and a robe that he adjusted to his son's size and then led Harry to his small kitchenette. He began to take out the things for tea and Harry fell into step beside him helping to fix the tea. Water was boiled, leaves were chosen, then steeped, and while the tea was steeping Harry arranged the tea things on a wide, silver platter. He smiled as he saw the pretty little cakes his father carefully took from a baker's box.

"These are petit fours. I get them from a bakery that your mother and I used to take our change to when we were children" explained Snape. He had taken out four and left the rest in the box. Once it was closed he re-cast the cooling and preservation charms that kept the confections fresh.

"I've seen them before," said Harry as he followed his father into the sitting room. "I don't think I've ever had them."

Snape put down the tea and pointed to one cake that had pink frosting and what appeared to be a pale blue flourish. "You can tell what the fillings and cakes are by the frosting. The little blue flourish means that it has blueberry in it, and the pink frosting is for a strawberry flavoured cake." He picked up the small petit four and handed it to his son.

Harry examined the little cake with wide eyes and then bit through the semi-hard shell of frosting and into the cake and filling. There was cake, and cream filling, and wonderful fruit all hidden within the sweet frosting.

"You're right, dad! There's blueberry and the strawberry is really very faint. This is good!" He sat back down on the sofa as his father poured the tea from a silver and green enameled teapot into matching teacups. "How come I've never seen these at dinner in the Great Hall?"

"These are a Muggle confection, Harry. I doubt the house elves even know what a petit four is. I buy two dozen at the beginning of each term, and then I save the petit fours for special occasions."

Harry took his tea and blew lightly across its steaming surface. "This isn't really special, though."

Snape took an appreciative sip of his tea. "I am referring to the fact that you are now officially in our quarters with your own room. Surely that is special, is it not?"

Harry smiled brightly as he picked up another petit four. He studied the white frosting and the yellow flourish. "Lemon filling and white cake?" he asked his father. Snape smirked lightly at him and Harry bit into the sweet confection. He grinned at his correct guess.

Once their pleasant tea was completed, Snape returned their conversation to the afternoon. Snape wanted to know if Harry knew he had conjured a Patronus.

Because he felt safer and more grounded, he curled up against his father. Snape Summoned an afghan that Minerva had knit for him one birthday. He kicked off his boots and covered his lap, and his son with the soft wool.

Harry wrapped a fist into the afghan and began to talk. "I was going to put the evil fish back into the pond, but it drained and disappeared. Before I could really get upset I just suddenly knew that it was wrong to keep the monster in the pond." Harry frowned and huffed in thought. "I think he wouldn't fit anymore. Maybe he got strong. So, I just concentrated. You know, the way you've been showing us lately to push someone else away?" Snape nodded, inwardly pleased at how his son had used his Occlumens exercises. "Well, so I pushed." Harry shrugged, finished. There was nothing else he could remember until he woke up in the Infirmary.

"Then, you never saw the fawn?" asked Snape. Harry glanced upward, completely puzzled. "When we found you, there was a fawn of silvery white light, known as a Patronus, lying next to you with its chin on your thigh."

Harry sat up. "What's a Patronus?"

"A Patronus is a reflection of the positive side of your magic," Snape enlightened his son. "It is powerful protective magic and the animal shape is rather symbolic. You may wish to read about having a fawn as a Patronus."

"Me? Is the fawn mine?" asked Harry with incredulity. His father nodded. "Wicked!" For awhile he smiled serenely at the flames in the fireplace and Snape was about to usher his son to bed, when Harry asked, "Dad, is Draco going to be all right?"

"I'll Floo call Lucius tomorrow to see how he is, Harry," replied Snape. "If Draco feels up to it, you can speak to him, then."

"Good." And then Harry yawned.

Snape escorted his son to bed and Harry's eyes were closing just as he snuggled down into the spell warmed sheets and the fluffy quilt of stuffed down. He heard the first, gentle snore that signaled his son was fast asleep. The Potions Master then hurried to his bedroom. He threw off his clothing, completed his ablutions, and finally climbed into his own bed.

Snape had forgotten the Dreamless Sleep Potion Madame Pomfrey had given him.

Lucius Malfoy sat in front of the wide fireplace of marble and gold that decorated the luxurious bedroom that belonged to he and Narcissa. Firmly in his lap with his head against his father's chest, Draco lay sleeping. The little boy had not slept in his father's lap since he was five years old and decided he was 'too big' for such things.

Lucius lifted a crystalline glass of very old Scotch to his lips and sipped it wearily. He glanced longingly at his bed, but refused to dislodge his son who had survived a terrifying encounter with the Dark Lord. Merlin's ghost, he cursed silently. He had never wanted his family anywhere near that bastard and today he'd nearly lost his little boy to Voldemort's spirit.

Narcissa, in her silk dressing gown of palest pink, kissed her husband's cheek and settled down beside him on the short settee. She began to card her fingers through her son's hair. When he whimpered in his sleep, Narcissa leaned over and kissed the child's warm brow.

"How is he doing?" she asked her husband.



"I ought to be thankful that he's asleep," sighed Lucius.

"Draco never said anything?" Lucius held his glass out to his wife and she took a grateful sip before he took the glass back and took another sip.

"Not one word. All he wanted to do was to hold onto me, Cissy." He hovered the drink and stroked his son's slightly pinked cheek. "He kept calling me 'Papa'."

Narcissa nodded. Lucius had begun to teach his son, at age three, to call him the more formal variation of 'Father'. Sadly he glanced down upon his sleeping child and felt like kicking himself for having done so. It was one of the little lessons in 'how to be a proper Malfoy' that had begun to push his son away from him.

"My father would never have done this for me," said Lucius as he glared at the flames.

"You are not Abraxas, dear one," Narcissa assured him as she took his hand and kissed the back of it. "I am so very proud of you, love," she smiled. "And Draco is, too. His letters to me have been filled with such love for you since you took on the duty of the Quidditch little league." Lucius smiled as his cheeks burned. Narcissa chuckled softly.

Narcissa shifted so that now she and Lucius were sharing the sweet burden of their sleeping son. Lucius' arm was now over her shoulders.

"Do you remember what you promised Draco the day he was born?" she asked quietly.

Lucius nodded, smiling at the memory of that day; one of few that he kept close to his heart. "I promised to be a father he could be proud of." He looked deep into his wife's loving eyes. "Is he, Cissy?"

"Very," she nodded. She placed the palm of her hand in front of her son's face and against Lucius' heart. "Let this be your guide, love."

He leaned over and kissed his wife's forehead. "Maybe my Dragon would rather keep calling me 'Papa'?" Lucius whispered, a tinge of longing in his voice.

Poor Snape had just settled into a relaxing sleep when he shot awake to the sound of screaming. For a moment he looked around for his dressing gown and slippers before he recalled that he had shrunk those for his son. Cursing himself and Merlin, and a few other deities for letting him forget to have given the Dreamless Sleep Potion to his son, he strode barefoot across the hall to the new bedroom.

Harry had stopped screaming, but he was fighting with fists and feet against an invisible opponent. The adversary manifested itself in this reality as his quilt and sheets bunched and twisted around his flailing body.

Snape touched his son's shoulder and meant to say something to him, but the boy jerked awake and scrambled away from his father's unexpected touch.

"Harry. It's me," his father said gently.

Harry blinked a few times through the remains of sleep and his perpetually blurry eyes. "Dad?" Snape leaned over the bed with the boy's glasses. Harry snatched at them and put them on. As soon as he could focus on his father's face he launched himself into the man's arms.

Snape curled his arms tightly about his son and sat on the edge of Harry's bed. "Can you tell me what your nightmare was about?"

For a very long moment Harry was quiet, content to hold tightly onto his father and not to have to think about anything else. He also didn't want to have to remind himself that he was eleven and he was acting like a baby.

Harry sighed, finally, and spoke softly. He didn't not notice the tremor in his voice. "Everything was dark except for these orbs, like the ones Draco and I found?" Snape just made an affirmative hum that Harry heard in his father's chest. They were everywhere and falling and terrible words came out of them. They... they killed Draco and they had Hermione. So, I ran, but I shouldn't have, but I had to. If I didn't run then I was going to be all on my own..." his voice faded briefly. Snape could feel one of the child's hands clutching spasmodically at his pyjama shirt. "I couldn't find you."

Snape had worried that this might be a vision, or even a nightmare about the Dursleys. He had expected nightmares after Harry's experience in the Department of Mysteries. Although he had been kicking himself for having forgotten the Dreamless Sleep Potion, perhaps it was best that his child did dream and got rid of them.

"I have no intention of leaving you alone, Harry," Snape said into the black hair beneath his chin. "You are my son and my responsibility." And, I love you, he said inwardly. Snape felt like the worst of cowards for not voicing what he'd known had been a part of him for some time. Even before the Cruor mea cruor adoption, to be honest.

Harry had heard what his father said, but for some reason it didn't entirely allay his fears. He saw from his nightmare, the darkness encroaching upon him and he could feel himself running, blindly, in a desperate search for his father. He had no idea that a trickle of tears were wetting Snape's night shirt.

"Harry?" Snape's slim index finger was insinuated beneath his son's chin and with a touch of pressure, he encouraged his son to look up into his eyes. He would not be a coward with this child. Although he had never said these words to anyone, including Lily, Snape would make himself voice what he felt. He only hoped that Harry would believe him. "I've told you before that nothing would make me turn you away. I shall always be here for you. As your father it is my responsibility, yes, but I do so because I also..." he swallowed over the sudden dryness in his throat. "Because, I would do nothing to ever lose you, child. I love you too much to let anything happen to you."

Snape knew he'd said those three words in just the right way when Harry smiled at him. And, more. Within the child's glorious green eyes was more than just the love Harry had for his father, but contentment and the knowledge that all was well with the world.

Tuesday, Oct. 29, 1991

Snape threw a pinch of Floo powder into the fireplace and called out, "Malfoy Manor, Lucius Malfoy!"

The Floo connection opened and Snape knelt (with the help of a Cushioning Charm) onto the hearth and stuck his head into the

green flames. As he shouted into the cavernous and empty Malfoy library for Lucius, Snape thought, once again, how nice it would be if the Mirror Communication System in use by the Auror Corp were made available to the wizarding public. Communication by Floo was stressful on the knees, the joints, and just undignified.

A house elf popped in front of Snape and bowed. "Master Snapes!" goggled the little nitwit. "You is needing Master Malfoys?"

Snape bit his tongue on the sarcastic remark he was going to make. Such snark was lost on most house elves. "I need to speak to Lucius."

"Dobby is getting Master Malfoys!" the house elf vanished and Snape did his best to work a kink out of his back.

The Potions Master really hated Floo calls.

"Severus!" Lucius had been popped in by his elf who immediately vanished. He wore a grey silk dressing gown that had been hastily tied around his waist. There were no slippers on his feet and he had dark circles beneath his eyes. He quickly cast a Cushioning Charm and knelt by Snape's head. "It's bloody early, man. Is something the matter?"

"Harry has been worried about Draco. How is he faring?" asked Snape.

"All of us had a rough night of bad dreams," sighed Lucius.

"I thought that Madame Pomfrey gave you Dreamless Sleep," wondered Snape.

"She did," amended Lucius. "Narcissa isn't entirely fond of that one and its addictive nature. She thought it better that Draco have his nightmares, talk them out, and deal with any resulting problems."

Snape nodded. He had to agree. Too often parents relied a bit too heavily on that particular potion never realising that they were only burying the problem. The Potions Master also knew of quite a few stories where parents had accidentally put their children to sleep, permanently, with Dreamless Sleep Potion.

"Has your son awakened, yet?" asked Snape.

"Dragon finally got to sleep about four this morning," Lucius smiled wanly. "He was worried about Harry and Hermione."

"Harry was worried, too. Will you be keeping Draco home, then?" Snape needed to note in the official Slytherin House record that Draco had missed the day for legitimate reasons.

The patrician nodded. "We all need to sleep. Why don't you call us just before dinner? The boys may talk then."

"I am sure that Harry will look forward to it," Snape replied. "Miss Granger will want to be included as well."

"And she is doing all right?" asked Lucius.

"I had Prefect Anglaise sleep in her dorm last night. No nightmares, but she seems a rather stoic sort," observed Snape.

"Cissy was particularly worried about her. Do let her know that if Hermione needs to speak to either of us, she may call at anytime." Snape nodded. Then Lucius asked, "Will you be notifying her parents?"

Snape frowned slightly at having his duties of Head of House questioned. "Of course, Lucius. Did you think otherwise?"

"Dumbledore," the older wizard simply replied.

Snape sighed in understanding. "I should like to show you a pensieve of the meeting I had with the Headmaster yesterday. It was... well, I've yet to be able to describe just what it was since it hasn't entirely sunk in, yet."

"We'll come early on Halloween, then." Lucius prepared to sign off on the call. "I'll send my son back to Hogwarts tomorrow, Severus. Good day."

With a nod, Snape pulled his head back into his quarters and went to wake up his son.

Harry and his father ate breakfast in their quarters (Snape found it pleasantly odd that he liked thinking that his quarters were now theirs!) and Snape observed his son as he drank his coffee. He hadn't felt like food, but in order to be a good example for his son, he had eaten some fruit and two eggs over easy. Only the coffee was making the food somewhat settle in his stomach.

His son was subdued, but Snape had the feeling that was due more to the fact that Harry had been disappointed that he couldn't talk to Draco that morning. The boy had even managed a half-hearted temper tantrum that he quickly apologised for before his father took him to task for it.

When Harry ate in the Great Hall he tended to have a much more gregarious nature than what he was showing now. The child smiled, laughed, and readily joined in conversations. The Harry Potter, now Snape, seated across from him was the one the Potions Master had been expecting to see more of after he had rescued him from the Dursleys.

Snape had read several books on child psychology. Although Slytherin House had the reputation of the most messed up children, over his tenure he had discovered that not one House was exempt from troubled children. He had become better at seeing the signs of trouble, not only because he'd had first hand knowledge of them, but his reading had also taught him a thing or two. More than a few times Snape had suggested that all the teachers ought to have a year's course in child psychology so the mistakes Minerva had egregiously made, wouldn't be made.

Hogwarts may be a top school in magic academia, but Snape knew that there were places it fell short in guiding the young minds that came to them, and one of the worst causes was the Headmaster.

Snape worried that his son's fluctuating mood swings, his tendency to drift from reacting like a younger child to sometimes being his own age, were warning signs. Harry would either have a breakthrough, or if Snape wasn't there to protect his son from the outside forces that meant him harm, he could have a breakdown mentally. He intended to do everything he possibly could, but with the Headmaster being as stubborn as he was, the many dangers Snape was trying to deflect were just that... many; an exhausting many.

"Are you all right, dad?" asked Harry softly as he glanced at his father over the rim of his glass of pumpkin juice.

Snape hadn't realised he had closed his eyes in thought. He opened them. "A little tired, perhaps," he smiled gently. "No worries, though."

Snape was rewarded by a small, cheeky smirk from his son as he quipped, "I think your students will worry, though."

"That they will, Harry!" His smile just a bit broader, Snape sighed. He finished his coffee, dabbed at his lips with his napkin, and then fully concentrated on his son who had finished his own breakfast. "Since I thought you might find it exceedingly boring staying here all day, I've asked Prefect Anglaise to escort Miss Granger to the Infirmary and you may join her there."

Harry's emotions were mixed. He desperately wanted to see Hermione, but did he have to be stuck in the Infirmary all day? His face reflected those concerns.

"You need not worry, Harry. Few students know that there is a solarium attached to the Infirmary that is quite a nice place to spend the day. I think you should take your bookbag with you so you both may study, although," he scowled here. "And I cannot believe I am saying this, I do not want you to study too much."

Harry snorted in amusement. Snape's right eyebrow rose fractionally and he stood. "Indeed. Get your school robes and your bookbag, Mr. Potter. It is time to leave."

"Yes, sir, dad!"

Hermione left the bathroom in her and Millicent Bulstrode's dorm and yawned. It had not been an easy night last night since she kept waking up with the terrible feeling that someone was following her. Tara Anglaise, the seventh year prefect, had stayed in Hermione and Millicent's dorm to help the first year through any nightmares she'd had.

It was embarrassing, but at the same time Hermione had been really glad not to be all alone. This morning, though, she felt oddly jealous of her two best friends who were each with their family, being comforted by a parent over yesterday's ordeal.

"What's the matter, 'Mione?" asked Millicent as she buttoned the cotton shirt she wore as part of her uniform under her school robes.

"I miss my parents," she sighed and leaned her head against one of the posts on her four-poster bed.

"You can write to them, you know?" Millicent reminded the girl.

"I know, but they won't really understand, Milli." Hermione and Millicent had shortened each others names a few days ago, but they didn't let anyone else use their private nicknames. Hermione had been tickled at being able to have something that was so "girly" that she'd never had before. "They'll get all worried and... and I don't know, but they might even try to make me leave Hogwarts."

Millicent paused in drawing her robes over her shoulders as her jaw dropped. "Would they really do that?"

Hermione shrugged. "I hope they don't. Neither one was too happy about learning I was a witch." She shuddered as she recalled how shrill her mother had been about the discovery.

"Magic? Are you joking? George, this will ruin everything we've planned for Hermione!" Jean Granger was in the living room as Hermione listened from the shadows of the hallway upstairs.

"You're over reacting, Jean," cautioned George Granger.

"Don't tell me I'm over reacting, George!" hissed Jean. "Hermione was going to be a doctor and now she's going to be some warty witch in a pointed hat?"

Hermione heard her father curse in reply. He was grumping, but he was doing little to support Hermione's desire to attend Hogwarts. Discovering she was a witch had explained so many odd things about herself and she couldn't wait to learn more about this secret world that lived right beside her plain existence.

"Everything we've done for that girl will be wasted, George, and don't you dare tell me you're not disappointed!" Jean demanded.



Hermione had known her mother wasn't going to take this discovery well. Ever since she could remember her mother had told her how she, their only daughter, would become a prestigious doctor. Hermione was a brilliant girl whose mind would take her into a world of luxurious society; something that Jean Granger had always craved. In fact, Hermione had long suspected that her mother had married George Granger, not because he was also a dentist like her, but his parents were wealthy and heavily into the social graces of society. Unfortunately, George's parents felt their son had married beneath him and had summarily disowned him, shunning his plain, Yorkshire wife. Jean had implied on more than one occasion that her daughter was her second chance at the society life she wanted.

Hermione had felt sick that night for having ruined everything for her mother. Deep down, though, a part of her had shouted in triumph because now she would get to live her life her way.

This was what she felt was threatened. Hermione had not told anyone, but she was sure her mother was waiting for the perfect excuse to pull her out of Hogwarts and out of the wizarding world. For good.

Millicent smiled in an attempt to cheer up her friend. "You don't have to write to them, 'Mione."

"Yeah, but Professor Snape will write, and Mrs. Malfoy will probably write, too." Still lost and a bit reluctant to leave her worries behind, Hermione didn't protest as Millicent pulled her up by her robes sleeve and pushed her gently from the dorm. In the common room, the two friends parted and Prefect Anglaise escorted Hermione to the Infirmary where she would have breakfast and wait for Harry to join her.

For a little while, after Harry had arrived, Hermione had forgotten all about her parents. Both she and Harry did their best to avoid the topic of yesterday. It was easy, at first, especially when Madame Pomfrey showed them into the solarium.

The solarium was a beautiful place! It was all glass and in the shape of an "L" as it was attached to the furthest corner of the Infirmary. Plants hung from the heavy wooden beams above and were also scattered about in large pots and planters. Comfortable, squashy chairs upholstered in a soft, cotton print were scattered amongst the

greenery along with two round tables where they could work on their homework, or play wizards chess, or one of the many boardgames that the medi-witch had on a shelf in the solarium.

Outside, the newest snow blanketed the grounds of Hogwarts and sparkled in the sunshine like diamonds.

Harry and Hermione had declared the solarium to be the best room in the castle.

Hermione directed them to both work on their homework first, and Harry couldn't help but tell his studious friend that his father had mentioned at breakfast that they shouldn't study too much. Hermione was suitably shocked, and Harry had laughed for a few minutes over that. For his friend, there was no such thing as too much study.

Companionably they read and then quizzed each other on Transfiguration theory. Hermione was a whiz, but Harry was still not wrapping his mind around the most basic of Transfiguration concepts. It frustrated him and he wondered, for the nine-hundredth time, why he couldn't just wave his wand and change something without have to think so hard about it.

"Transfiguration would be pants in combat," Harry muttered sullenly. "You'd get Blasted before you even had a chance to think what you would want to turn your enemy into."

Hermione sighed with patience. "Very few witches and wizards use Transfiguration in a combat situation, Harry. Not unless Transfiguration is as second nature to them as breathing is. You ought to think of the more practical needs of Transfiguration," she suggested.

He rolled his eyes. "Like I'm going to need my buttons turned into thimbles in the future."

Boys, thought Hermione. Sometimes they just couldn't think beyond Quidditch or ditching class. Transfiguration had hundreds of everyday uses. And there were so many levels to the art, too. There was permanent Transfiguration, or temporary Transfiguration. Inanimate to inanimate Transfiguration was the most common, but Hermione was intrigued by inanimate to animate Transfiguration and

couldn't wait to learn that. Thinking of the advanced aspects, she thought of something that might give Harry the excuse he needed to buckle down and pay more attention in class.

"Have you heard of Animagi?" she asked him.

Harry looked up, catching a devious twinkle in his friend's brown eyes. "Nope. What is it."

"It is when a wizard is able to transform into an animal. It's a very advanced level of Transfiguration and not everyone can do it, but I bet you might be able to do it, Harry. The thing is, you have to pay attention in Transfiguration now so you have a solid foundation for the Animagus training."

Harry's eyes did glimmer at that. It would be really wicked to be able to turn into an animal. "When do we get to learn to do that?"

Hermione grimaced slightly and Harry's bright look dimmed just a bit. "Well, we don't. It's a very specialised training and like I said, not everyone can do it. In our seventh year, we could ask Professor McGonagall if she'd teach us. I don't think you ever saw it, but she's a cat Animagus."

"Seventh year?" Harry blanched at that. He'd have to study Transfiguration for that long? Of course, he didn't stop to think that Transfiguration was one of the magical arts taught at Hogwarts that you had to take for seven years.

Hermione nodded, but then perked up, "Maybe there are some books in the library that would tell us more."

Harry sighed. He really didn't want to go to the library voluntarily. Even so, Harry did put a bit more effort than usual into his studying and his Transfiguration essay reflected that. As a steady "A" student so far, he would be pleasantly surprised later to learn that he earned a solid "E".

Hermione wanted to continue studying, but Harry, finally at the end of his rope with studying, talked the girl into playing a game of Build Hogwarts. It was a fascinating 3D and animated game that quizzed the players on various bits of wizarding history. Each player (up to four) was allowed to select a Founder game piece that would help

the player with clues to the answers, or cheer them on. As each player got a correct answer, Hogwarts would slowly be built. However, too many wrong answers in a row took away vital stonework that supported the castle.

Harry chose Salazar Slytherin to help him and Hermione chose Rowena Ravenclaw. The pieces were very intricate at five inches tall. They were both very opinionated.

The quizzing device was a round crystal in which the player who had the next turn, tapped the ball, and a whispery female voice would ask the question.

Hermione had the first turn, so she tapped the crystal. The voice spoke, "Which of Hogwarts' former heads was also a celebrated healer at St Mungo's?"

"Dilys Derwent!" Hermione replied quickly. "That was an easy one!" She grinned as they watched the foundation of the castle build itself a quarter of the way.

"That one was easy?" asked Harry. His chin slumped upon his hand as his elbow rested on his knee. He had a feeling this was going to be a long game. Although, and he smiled wickedly, if he gave enough wrong answers, the castle would fall!

As the game went on, Harry discovered he had listened in History of Magic class a bit more than he'd fallen asleep. Snape checked his work in all of his classes and that included History which so many students sloughed off on. Professor Binns assigned essays, but too often he forgot to collect them, or if he had them, he sometimes never got around to grading them. Snape had given up trying to talk the Headmaster into hiring at least a teacher's assistant for the old ghost, but Dumbledore thought everything was fine.

Halfway through the building of Hogwarts, it was Harry's turn. He tapped the globe and the voice asked, "Who did the Sorting Hat originally belong to?"

Harry frowned. That was a new one on him. He glanced at Hermione who obviously knew the answer because she was sitting on both hands in an effort not to raise one. Harry smirked at that, but he was still stuck on what the answer was. He then glanced down at

his playing piece, Salazar Slytherin, who had his arms crossed as he glanced in annoyance at one of the Founders that was in the reserve rack and who was jumping up and down. Harry giggled. "Godric Gryffindor!"

"That's cheating!" Hermione huffed with disgust at the figure of Gryffindor.

"Not when the answer's as plain as the nose on your face, girly!" shouted Godric Gryffindor.

It was at that point that the Founders pieces all began arguing with each other and both Harry and Hermione left the game to do some more studying.

Madame Pomfrey came into the solarium about an hour before lunch to find her two charges asleep on the two cots that she had Transfigured for them from two of the chairs. She spent a few minutes removing their books and notes and quills over to a nearby table and then she placed the covers over them and finally ran a quick, general Diagnostic Charm to check that they were well physically.

At lunch time Snape arrived to check on his two Snakes and found them each eating soup, salad, and some fruit cocktail for dessert.

"Hello, Professor!" greeted Hermione.

"Hi, sir," greeted Harry. He was a little unsure as to whether or not he could refer to the man as his father, or his teacher.

"Hello, Harry, Hermione," Snape greeted, setting his son's slight confusion at ease. "How are you two feeling?"

"Okay," mumbled Harry. He had a feeling his father might talk about yesterday and he didn't want to. It had been such a nice day so far.

Hermione was subdued as well, but her reply of, "Fine, sir," was a bit chipper. The girl, though, knew that their teacher was settling down to speak to them about the Department of Mysteries.

Snape did settle in one of the chairs but the children had a bit of a reprieve while he ate lunch with them. Once lunch was finished and the dishes cleared away, Snape eyed the two children before him.

"I cannot say that I understand what happened at the Ministry yesterday," Snape began. "I do know that it was frightening in different ways for both of you."

"But I'm feeling better, dad," Harry's attempt was to convince his father, but a part of him wanted to convince himself, too.

Snape held up a hand. "I know you would like to be over such a thing in twenty-four hours, son, but it does not work that way. I want you to know that neither of you are alone in this." He narrowed his gaze upon Harry. "As your father, there is never a time when you would be bothering me if you need me, Harry. If you are having nightmares, or just want to talk to me, about anything, I am here for you."

Harry drew in a deep breath and smiled. "Thanks, dad. What about Hermione?" he glanced over at his friend.

"Miss... Hermione. As your Head of House I am here for you, as well." His gaze trapped hers gently. "The Malfoys also wished that I let you know that if you need someone to speak to, you may Floo call either Lucius or Narcissa at anytime."

"I wouldn't want to impose," Hermione said hesitantly.

"The Malfoys are your magical Sponsors, Hermione," Snape clarified. "It is a responsibility that they both have taken very seriously. Neither of them wish you to feel that you are alone in this, so do not hesitate. Understood?"

"Thank you, sir. I think... well... I sort of would like to talk to Mrs. Malfoy," she said hesitatingly.

Snape canted his head to the side slightly. "I do believe that it was requested you refer to your Sponsors as aunt and uncle?"

Hermione smiled and she blushed. "Aunt Cissy. I'd like to talk to her."

Snape nodded. "I'll be Floo calling the Malfoys before dinner. Harry will be speaking to Draco and you are welcome to speak to Narcissa."

Harry and Hermione played a little more of their Building Hogwarts game, but they both had to admit that they were tired. Hermione's magical core was still "bruised" as Madame Pomfrey termed it, and she would find that she needed naps at the oddest times. The medi-witch had cautioned her against ignoring the need.

Harry had just had a fairly sleepless night and even his naps were touched, though lightly now, by a replay of the afternoon at the Ministry. He didn't thrash about, and he certainly didn't wake up screaming, but he wasn't terribly well rested, either. Madame Pomfrey had told him, too, that naps would only help him. Inwardly he had groaned at that; why did everyone think he was such a baby?

Prefect Gordon Billock escorted the two first year Slytherins from the Infirmary a half hour before dinner to their Head of House's office. Upon entering the office they found Snape at his Floo ushering Lucius, Draco, and Narcissa through.

"Harry!" Draco shouted as soon as he saw his best friend he ran towards him and hugged him quickly. He then gave Hermione a relieved glance and hugged her, too. "You all right, Hermione?"

"Mostly tired, but I guess I'm okay." To Hermione's surprise, and soon delight, Narcissa swept across the ancient floor and drew the young girl into her embrace.

"Do forgive me, Hermione," Narcissa said softly as she cupped Hermione's cheek so she could see into her eyes. "I should have come and taken you to Malfoy Manor."

Hermione smiled, "It's okay, Aunt Cissy. I'm just glad to see you now."

Narcissa leaned down and kissed the child's forehead and Hermione blushed with the maternal warmth that suffused her. Her own mother had never been so affectionate.

With Draco going back to lean against his father as Lucius sat in one of the chairs in front of Snape's desk, and Hermione getting hugs from Narcissa, Harry was feeling a bit left out. As though he sensed this, Snape motioned Harry over to him and the young first year happily went to his father's side and let out a sigh of satisfaction as his father draped an arm across his shoulders.

"Are you doing well, Draco?" asked Snape as he sat down at his desk chair. Harry leaned lightly against him.

Draco nodded then shrugged. He then glanced at his father who spoke softly, "Tell Severus what you told me, Dragon."

Draco shifted nervously and glanced at Harry before staring down at his feet. "The orb that Har... that You-Know-Who wanted me to get for him fell on Harry when he cast the fawn. When it broke, I heard a voice."

"Wait!" Snapped Snape. "Miss Granger, Mr. Potter, please go to dinner. I then want you to return immediately to your dorms and to bed."

Lucius frowned, and Harry was about to ask why they had to leave, when his father glared pointedly at him. With a small glower, he and Hermione left.

A quick wave of his wand set up a Silencing Charm (in case Harry had the bright idea to do a little eavesdropping) and a Locking Charm. Snape then lowered his gaze to Draco who felt very self-conscious with all the adults looking at him expectantly.

"Mr. Malfoy? What did the voice say?" asked Snape.

Draco swallowed and relaxed, just a bit, when his father slipped a comforting arm about his waist. From his memory he repeated what he had heard when the orb shattered against his friend's head.

"The one with the power to vanquish the Dark Lord approaches...Born to those who have thrice defied him, born as the seventh month dies...and the Dark Lord will mark him as his equal, but he will have power the Dark Lord knows not...and either must die at the hand of the other for neither can live while the other survives..."



As if the attempt to remember exhausted him, Draco sagged against his father. Lucius turned slightly and caught his son in his arms. Not caring that his teacher was watching, the child wearily laid his cheek against his father's chest and closed his eyes. As far as Draco was concerned, he was done for the day.

Lucius patted his son's back and rose to his feet. Snape rose as well, and eyed Draco with a furrowed brow. "He is not doing well, is he?" he observed.

"He's had very little sleep, even today," sighed Lucius. "To have to face the Dark Lord within your best friend's body is... unpleasant, Severus."

Snape's lips thinned in concern. "It did not appear that he blamed Harry."

Narcissa shook her head. "Somehow, I don't believe he does. One of the nightmares that he woke from he was trying to save Harry and he couldn't. Although Luc wanted Dragon to stay while we came here, it was very important for Dragon to see Harry."

"And for Harry to see Draco." Snape came around his desk, and hesitantly touched his fingers to Draco's soft hair. He observed that the boy had fallen asleep in his father's embrace. "I believe it might be best if you give him the Dreamless Sleep tonight," he suggested. "Then, send him back in the morning so he may attend classes with Harry and Hermione. Although I'm sure they talked little, if at all, about the incident, it seems to have done them well to have each other near. Draco might respond well to their presence, too."

"I think you're right, Severus," agreed Lucius. "I'll bring him just after breakfast."

Snape then escorted his guests to the Floo, tossed in a handful of the sparkling black powder, then watched as the Malfoy family vanished back home through the green flames.

A late night correspondence.

Lucius,

Quirrell's in the Infirmary.

Students playing in the snow found him in the south courtyard almost buried in the snow. Poppy believes that he collapsed some time yesterday afternoon. He is in a coma and Poppy is not certain that he will make it.

Severus

S.,

Have you examined Quirrell?

L.

Lucius,

I did a few minutes ago. His magical core is barely registering. I risked Legilimens on him and found nothing. If he lives, it will be a miracle.

Severus

S.,

Is it possible that what happened to our children in the Dept. of Mysteries was the cause?

L.

Lucius,

I believe so. We shall discuss this further on Halloween.

Severus

Snape sent the last letter and made his way back to bed. He doubted he would be able to sleep. His son had cast a wandless, wordless Patronus, in his mind, to expel the Dark Lord. Now, the DADA instructor was abed in the Infirmary and just might die.

It was proof enough to Snape that the man had been possessed, or perhaps completely taken over by the spirit of the undead wizard.

The Potions Master could only foresee more trouble ahead and even with a dose of Dreamless Sleep, he didn't sleep.

A/N: Halloween is coming up next. Tell me, do you think Quirrell's going to have that "miracle"?

A few readers sent me PM's this week asking me if I was going to offer something, like a short story gift, to whoever is the 1,000th reviewer. Good grief! I had no idea I was that close! So, what do you think? Should I offer some little prize like that? I've never hit 1,000 reviews on any of my stories, so it might be a nice thing to do.

New Poll on profile. Check it out, please.

A/N explanation: A few anonymous reviewers have complained that Harry, Draco, and Hermione are acting too young. If I may remind folks, these are 11 year old kids. They are on the fence between wanting to be grown up one second, and in the embrace of a loving parent the next. Add to that some of the very frightening things going on around them and to them, I'd say they have every right to scream for papa or daddy. As for Harry – he's been abused. He's never had a loving parent. Of course he wants to be grown up, but he also wants to have what he never had before – hugs and kisses – such as all kids grow up with. Also, you have to remember, Lily has been in his dreams "telling" her son about the Dark Man who is good and the foolish Headmaster since he was very young. Because of his "angel" he knew right away it was safe to trust the Dark Man and it was safe to seek assurance, acceptance, and even love from him. His mummy said it was all right.

Thank you. :)

Thursday, Oct. 31, 1991 - Halloween

The Silver Trio were back together by Wednesday and kept huddled together. If they spoke amongst each other, Snape didn't know of it. By today their spirits were as high as any of the other students were for Halloween.

Snape glanced over at Minerva to see how she was doing while he awaited the appearance of his breakfast. There had been no word, yet, from the Board of Governors about her position with Gryffindor. The Transfiguration professor had been quiet since leaving the Ministry. Something he had expected. Snape hoped that resolution would come soon.

A full day of teaching, and then a night filled with over-sweetened children, and overly hormonal teenagers to watch over, Snape mused, as he sighed at his breakfast. At least Dumbledore's rosebushes, a popular hiding place for teenaged couples to seclude themselves, would be free of his minor Blasting Spell this year. Snape expected that it would be Minerva who kept her eye upon such things with the older years at their ball. He would be dealing with the lower years, which allowed him to watch over his son.

Snape stabbed at his sausages with his fork, brutally impaling one upon the four tines. With his knife, he sliced it smoothly into bite sized pieces that he did away with forthwith. Coffee, very strong and bitter, followed the sausage giving Snape some sensation that he would survive this day.

The Potions Master glanced over at the Slytherin table to watch as the twins entertained the Snakes with some sort of legerdemain juggling act. He glared as he caught his son's worshipful appreciation of the identical redheads. He hoped that Harry wasn't becoming a bit too enamored of them. Although Fred and George were doing well in watching out for the youngest Snakes (Minerva was sure those two had adopted all the first year Slytherins), Snape didn't want his son to worship the Weasleys as heroes.

"Severus, stop staring at Harry before you burn a hole in him," chided Minerva.

He glanced over to see a letter in her hand that she had not opened. "From the Board?" he asked astutely.

She nodded, tapping the edge of the letter by her plate. Impulsively, Minerva shoved the letter at him. "Would you?" she asked a bit nervously.

Snape took the letter, eying the older witch. "Worried?" he asked as he broke the seal.

"I'm fairly certain as to what they decided, Severus, but I'm not overly inclined to read it." She tapped her fork into her eggs as her colleague unfolded the letter. "Don't read it. To me, I mean. Just tell..."

"They have relieved you of your Head of House duties," Snape summarised bluntly. He knew Minerva would appreciate his brevity. "The position is to be taken over by the new Deputy." Minerva sighed, a small smile gracing her lips. "I take it you were hoping for this, Minerva?" He folded the letter and dropped it beside her plate.

"Albus would never have let me go, Severus," she spoke softly, although their conversation was well concealed by the other teachers chattering over their breakfasts, and the students in the Hall. "His favors aren't always the blessing he intends them to be."

"You were easily manipulated," he said cautiously.

"I was, then, a young girl infatuated by an older man," the witch scoffed. Snape smirked and she inclined her head towards him. "And..." she paused, smiling wryly, "I was easily manipulated."

Snape strode briskly across the front of his class as he looked at his students. Two Gryffindors dared to continue chatting over some silly gossip after he had begun class. "Miss Brown! Miss Patil! Your gossip is hardly germane to my class. 10 points each! Everyone, take out your books and turn to page 149."

He swept towards his chalk board, waved his hand over it, and a potions recipe began writing itself on the board. Behind him was the uneven swish of textbooks being retrieved from bookbags and pages rapidly being turned. When the noise had died down, he faced his students once again. Giving all of his first years class his sternest expression, he began his lecture.

"Today we are brewing an Itch Relieving Paste. As only a few of you actually read the chapter on this particular potion," he stated as he strolled down the main aisle between the students and took a moment to glare at most of the Gryffindors and the two blockheads, Crabbe and Goyle. "We shall see what was read. Who can tell me why we are using grapefruit seeds as opposed to pineapple extract?"

Snape's lips thinned in irritation as the majority of students looked hopelessly at the open pages of their textbooks. One hand on the Gryffindor side rose hesitantly and with an aggrieved sigh Snape addressed the student, "Mr. Longbottom, can you really enlighten us?"

Neville gulped. Next to him Hermione nodded in encouragement and Snape frowned, very slightly, in question. His newest Snake gave her Head of House a very small smile. After a second nervous swallow, Neville tried his best to ignore that the entire class was staring at him.

"Grapefruit seed and pineapple extract p-p-p-provide the same reac... I mean, catalyst for the paste." Neville's eyes blinked rapidly in his nervousness.

Snape's arms folded over his chest as he waited, with interest, for the rest of the answer.

Neville took another breath, glanced over to his partner, Draco, who also gave him a nod of encouragement. "W-w-we're using grapefruit seed because it's... uhm... it's less explosive than pineapple extract if something should g-g-go wrong." The boy let out a huff of nervous air and his shoulders drooped as several muscles relaxed. Harry suppressed a grin, just barely, at the Gryffindor.

"Adequate, Mr. Longbottom," mused Snape. His eyes then narrowed sharply. "I wonder, Mr. Longbottom, would you be able to expand upon your explanation and tell us precisely why one ingredient is more volatile than the other?"

Neville's head snapped up and he gave his teacher a frozen look of fear. Snape's neutral expression became a souring glare. Draco elbowed Neville who let out a yelp as he blurted, "The alkaline in the seeds is released slower!" The boy glanced up at his teacher, his

cheeks little red cherries with embarrassment. "Sorry, sir," he whispered.

"There is no reason to be apologetic, Mr. Longbottom," sniffed Snape as he whirled dramatically back to the front of the classroom. "Your answer was correct. Five points to Gryffindor."

Once his teacher was no longer looking at him, Neville shot grateful looks to Hermione and Draco. They both smiled at him.

Snape turned abruptly and centered his attention on, "Mr. Malfoy." His voice purred with warning. His Silver Trio were up to something and he would uncover this little mystery by the end of class.

Smile gone, spine stiff, Draco replied respectfully, "Yes, sir?"

"You read the chapter." He lifted his wand towards his textbook and with a wave it snapped shut. He turned sideways and with another twitch of his wand, the chalkboard flipped so no one could see the recipe. "Tell me, Mr. Malfoy, how many ingredients are used in this variation of the Itch Relief Paste?"

Without hesitation, Draco smirked as he replied, "Seven, sir."

"Ten points to Slytherin," he declared and nodded to the boy. As he turned slightly, a decidedly evil smirk touched his lips, and his gaze focused upon another Gryffindor. "Miss Brown!" The girl squeaked and looked up at her teacher with wide eyes. Snape waved his wand and her book shut with a loud crack, causing her to jump. "Tell me one of the seven ingredients in this potion."

Lavender's jaw dropped and she looked quickly for help from her friends. The Gryffindors had learned one important lesson in Snape's class and that was, if you were called upon to answer a question, no one was allowed to come to your assistance because that only meant a points loss. Seeing that she was on her own, Lavender tried to open her textbook, but it was tightly closed. Finally resigned to her fate, she sighed and gave her answer.

"I don't know, sir," Lavender replied pitifully, hoping that a glance of her puppy-dog brown eyes would engender some sympathy.

Snape scowled at the girl. He was immune to puppy-dog eyes. "Obviously you deemed it unnecessary to pay attention to Mr. Longbottom, Miss Brown. Five points from Gryffindor," he ground out. Neville slumped angrily at his hard won points being so easily thrown away. Without removing his disapproval from the lazy girl, Snape called out, "Mr. Longbottom! You were paying attention. Give me one ingredient in this potion!"

Neville's eyes brightened as he straightened and promptly replied, with confidence rarely seen in Snape's class, "Milkweed, frog's liver, white dittany, flax seed, Sogrief's kefir, papaya root, and grapefruit seeds."

Snape turned slowly to eye the boy, his eyebrows rising up in surprise. "Indeed, Mr. Longbottom." Snape was impressed and if the smug looks of his three Snakes were any indication, they definitely had something to do with the Gryffindor's recent academic achievement. He eyed his Snakes and the dark glimmer in his eyes told them, you are not getting off this easily! Suddenly he was leaning over Neville who pushed back against his chair, nearly withdrawing his head into his shoulders. "If you can acceptably brew this potion, Mr. Longbottom," he intoned in a deep, silken drawl, "you will earn twenty points for Gryffindor." A stunned silence fell over the class. Straightening and marching back to the front of the class, Snape barked, "Well? Get started!"

The class was stirred into action. Benches scraped the floor and a frenzy of shoes upon the stone floor hurried into the ingredients cabinet. Within ten minutes, flames sputtered beneath the cauldrons and everyone was chopping, dicing, and shredding their ingredients.

Retreating to his desk, he seated himself before a stack of essays. He picked up his quill and dipped it in the ink, and then solemnly intoned, "Miss Granger, Mr. Snape, and Mr. Malfoy, you will stay after class." Once he heard their polite acknowledgments, he began his grading.

Potions class finally ended and with a brusque order to his students to fill their sample jars and bring them up to his desk, Snape spoke no more. One by one he collected the jars, quickly checked each one to make sure it was labeled properly, and then placed each within a wooden box.



Neville Longbottom made his way to the front of the class, practically pushed forward by Hermione and Draco. Harry followed, but tried not to snigger. Upon reaching his teacher's desk, Neville held out his sample, his hand shaking so much that it dropped from his fingers.

Snape caught the falling jar and lifted it up to look at it. It was pale green and when he swirled the sample, the contents did not move. Snape removed the lid, sniffed the contents critically, then dipped his pinky finger into the green paste and drew out a small bit of the potion. He rubbed his thumb against the pad of his little finger.

Still studying the paste, Snape spoke solemnly, "Mr. Longbottom, I would be very interested in knowing how you managed, not only a nearly perfect Itch Relief Paste, but you answered a question in my class without requiring smelling salts."

Neville flushed quickly glanced between Draco and Hermione. "I had help, sir," he said with a brave, yet slightly tremulous smile.

"Then I believe you ought to avail yourself of that assistance again. Dismissed." He waved his hand sharply to shoo the boy out.

"Wait!" piped up Harry as he caught Neville's sleeve, stopping the Gryffindor's rush out of the classroom. Harry's big green eyes looked up at his father. "He gets his points, doesn't he? Sir?"

Snape glowered at his son's reminder. Was it really that bad of him to hope that Longbottom might have forgotten about the points? Harry smiled trustingly at him and Snape let out a melodramatic sigh. He just couldn't find it in him to ignore such a vote of confidence. It seemed his son was to be his little Conscience. "Very true, Mr. Potter." He then turned his dark gaze to Neville, not changing his exasperated expression. "Twenty points, Mr. Longbottom." His gaze hardened at the boy's brief smile. "See that you keep them!"

"Yes, sir, Professor Snape! I will!" Before anyone could stop him, Neville flashed a grin of thanks to the Silver Trio and raced out of the classroom. Snape regarded his Snakes. "Mr. Snape, tell me about Mr. Longbottom's remarkable performance in class today."

"Well, Fred and George have sort of been helping us with our studies in the library and we," he glanced at his compatriots, "and

we found out Neville hasn't had anyone to study with, sir," replied Harry.

Draco added, "Neville's dorm mates were Thomas, Finnegan, and the Weasley kid."

"Ah," nodded Snape in understanding. Dean Thomas had been expelled and Finnegan and Weasley were on suspension.

"We just figured that since the twins were helping us that Neville just ought to join us, Professor," Hermione completed.

"What happened to the rest of your study group?" inquired Snape in reference to Theodore Nott, Blaise Zabini, Millicent Bulstrode, and Pansy Parkinson.

Draco shrugged before answering, "Pansy doesn't really like the twins and since Teddy and Blaise like her, they just wound up studying on their own, Professor."

Hermione added, "Milli's studying with us, though. She and Pansy just keep arguing." Hermione shook her head.

"Is it okay if we keep studying with Fred and George, sir?" asked Harry.

Snape frowned lightly. He didn't wish to break up the study group, but he wasn't entirely convinced that the twins were ideal role models for his Slytherins. Reluctantly he nodded, "For now you can. However, if I hear that any of you are part of one of their pranks, you will all be cleaning the Great Hall with toothbrushes."

The boys grimaced at each other. Hermione had no plans to join any pranks, so she wasn't worried about such a detention. She had something else on her mind.

"Sir, Madame Pince doesn't like us studying in the library," Hermione observed. "Since Fred, George, and Neville can't come to our common room, and we can't go to theirs, is there someplace we could study?"

"As a matter of fact I know of an ideal place, Miss Granger." He pointed at one of the shelves in his office that held a variety of

preserved things. "Behind that shelf is an unused antechamber. I will open that for you and put in a desk and some chairs." Snape did not mention that it would be the ideal place for him to keep an eye upon his son and his friends.

Hermione was excited about that. "Can we use it tonight, Professor Snape?"

Snape just gave the girl a wry smirk as Draco and Harry both reminded her that it was Halloween and they'd be too busy stuffing themselves with wondrous food and sweets.

The girl blushed, suitably chastened and then asked, "How about tomorrow, sir?"

"It will be ready for you." He then went back to examining the potion samples. "Now. Get out." He waved them off.

Snape entered the Infirmary to check on Quirrell and found Madame Pomfrey running one of her endless Diagnostic Spells over the still unconscious wizard.

"Will he awaken, Poppy?" asked Snape

"As I told you and Albus last night, Severus, he was weakened by a great expenditure of magic. When the magical core is damaged in such a manner, there is no one who can predict how quick or slow recovery will be," the medi-witch lectured sadly.

The Potions Master clasped his hands behind his back. "Were you able to discover when he was injured?"

"I cast Vestigium vicis. It is a complicated spell, more forensic in nature, and as it was I had to consult with an expert at St. Mungo's to finally get it cast correctly. It aids a healer in the time when an injury occurred." She Summoned a report that was a result of the spell she had cast and handed it over to Snape.

Taking the parchment Snape quickly read the runic results and then looked up in surprise. "Quirrell collapsed the same time Harry did at the Ministry."

Poppy nodded, her lips thinned. "Severus, I never was terribly bright as far as puzzles went, but I have put the pieces together and what I am seeing disturbs me." She sent him a questioning look, but his expression hardened to stone. "Don't shut me out, Severus," she said tightly as she stepped close to him. "I know about Harry's nightmares and I know you have not told Albus of them. Trust me, now, or I will have no choice but to go to the Headmaster with my concerns."

The confrontation from the smaller woman rather threw Snape. He had never had a reason not to put his trust into Poppy and she, in fact, had kept hidden many things he could not discuss or deal with when he was growing up at Hogwarts. It was to her he would go to when he desired a sympathetic ear. When he had taken on the mantle of spy, Snape had insisted that Poppy know what he was doing and even though the Headmaster usually saw him right after the worst of the Dark Lord's meetings, it was Poppy who would nurse him back to health, visit him, or get after him when he was neglecting himself.

"I have always trusted you, Poppy," he said with a touch of chagrin, and not a little hurt.

The medi-witch picked up his hand and clasped it tightly. "I know you have, my dear, and that is why I am angry with you." Poppy drew Snape away from the unconscious man and seated him in a chair while she sat upon an unoccupied bed. "Severus, I know that Harry is not truly yours." He started to deny her assertion but she captured his hands in hers to keep him in place. "Listen to me. I have kept all your secrets, your worries, and your fears to myself. If you and Lily really had an affair, I would have known it."

"So you say, but obviously it was something I chose not to share with you!" Snape scoffed and tried to yank his hands away, but the medi-witch was stronger than she looked.

Poppy squeezed his hands tightly as she glared. "I know your tells, Severus Snape. Just as you so often like to threaten your students, don't lie to me because I will know if you do."

"What is it that you think you know, witch?" he persisted in the denial.

"I am very close to slapping you, young man, so lose that attitude," she threatened, her gaze sharpening. Snape recoiled from the admonishment, knowing full well that the medi-witch followed through on her threats. "I don't wish to know how you so effectively managed the deception with Harry, nor am I about to tell anyone. Don't forget, my dear, he spent a week in my Infirmary and I am all too aware of what those Muggles did to him, not over a few days, but years." She smiled. "It is good that he has a family that he cares for. A father who cares for him."

Poppy regarded the young man she had trapped in his chair. In all her years of being a Healer and of working at Hogwarts, no other child had become as close to her as Severus Snape had. She remembered the shy, thin boy who wore second-hand robes that had been patched by an unsteady hand. Severus had needed a Nutrition Potion, like some students did, and Poppy had prepared them and had her personal house elf slip the potion into his food. Over the years Severus had visited her Infirmary more than any other student and her small reward for that time was seeing a side of the child, and soon growing boy, that no one else ever saw. Severus Snape was a passionate, intelligent boy who was deeply sensitive and too often took personal slights too harshly. There were many times Poppy had held the child as he was wracked with tears; the worst time being the death of his mother. The medi-witch had no doubt, that the acerbic shell most everyone knew as the real Potions Master, was shed only for his son, Harry. Poppy knew that there would be nothing he wouldn't do to keep his child safe.

Poppy spoke softly, "I am concerned about Harry, Severus. I know about the nightmares because it was Narcissa Malfoy who mentioned them to me. And before you get indignant about that, she is a mother who was concerned because Draco was concerned and had asked his mother how he could help his friend. I am also concerned because of that report I just showed you. So, tell me, my dear, please, what is going on?"

Snape's shoulders drooped and his head dropped slightly allowing his hair to fall forward and conveniently obscure his features. Gently he tugged his hands from Poppy's and this time she let go. Poppy regarded him critically as he slowly lifted his head. His speech was reluctant, at first. "Dumbledore has maintained that Harry is somehow connected to Voldemort through his scar. The

Headmaster believes it to be a curse scar. Lucius believes it to be rune magic combined with old Earth magic."

Snape could not, yet, mention how, during the Cruor mea cruor ceremony, Lily had affectionately touched the lightning bolt scar. It had been that simple, ghostly touch that confirmed for the Potions Master that the scar was not something created and cursed by Voldemort. He continued, "The Unspeakable we met in the Department of Mysteries the other day, confirmed for Lucius and I that the scar was from magic fashioned by Lily. She also said that a Fiend, an evil spirit, had rooted itself in Harry's mind through cracks in his mother's protective spellwork." He scowled, "Cracks that had occurred through abuse from the family that was meant to cherish him."

Poppy scowled at the tone in the young man's voice. It was obvious that Severus blamed the Headmaster for the weakening of Lily's magic. Albus Dumbledore was a stubborn, manipulative, old man, and too often she had seen the results of the older wizard's machinations. Before her was her cherished, yes, cherished, Severus who had not only bent under the yoke of He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named, but that of Albus Dumbledore's lemon drop manipulation. Poppy had sat, figuratively, upon the sidelines where she could only watch as those two wizards continued to hurt him.

Snape grimaced and sighed as he momentarily pinched the bridge of his nose. Poppy, knowing this was a sign of the young man's migraines, Summoned a Migraine Potion and handed it to him. He drank down a portion and pocketed the rest.

"Harry was possessed when he went to the Hall of Prophecy. He..." His dark gaze trapped the older witch's gaze. "Not Harry, but Voldemort." Poppy drew in a hissed gasp. Snape continued, his tone soft, "Voldemort wove some sort of luring spell that Hermione was able to resist so she wisely came to find us. The spell continued to draw Draco into the depths of the Department of Mysteries until... well, I think it must have worn off, or Harry, from within a trap in his mind, broke it."

"Whatever were they doing there, Severus?" asked Poppy with great curiosity.

Snape replied through a slight growl, "There was a Prophecy that concerned Harry and Voldemort that he wanted. Harry, obviously and unfortunately short in stature, could not reach the orb so he ordered Draco to retrieve it. When Draco was unable to do so, Voldemort intended going to kill my Snake. It was Harry, from within his mind, who saved them both. My son used all of his power to force the Fiend of the Dark Lord from his mind by casting a Patronus."

"Oh Merlin's staff, Severus! No wonder the poor child exhausted his magical core."

Snape nodded in agreement. "I also believe that the force of Harry's magic injured the Fiend, which is why Quirrell collapsed."

Poppy glanced in puzzlement at the DADA professor who had not wakened. She then focused on Snape. "I don't understand. Was He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named possessing Professor Quirrell?" she asked in confusion.

"He still is, Poppy." The medi-witch shook her head sadly, pitying the poor wizard. "I looked into Quirrell's mind the night Dumbledore summoned me after he was found in the snow bank in the courtyard. As you already know his magic was very low, but I saw the core and... it was horrid, Poppy," he closed his eyes briefly. "There was so much scarring. I do not know how long Voldemort has been occupying the man's mind, but I believe it has not been a willing occupation."

Poppy let out a worried sigh. "Is there a chance Quirinus will survive this?" she asked, looking once again at the mentally injured wizard.

Snape shook his head. "I do not see how that would be possible, Poppy. For some time now the spirit of Voldemort, the Fiend, has been parasitically living off of Quirrell..."

The medi-witch interrupted, stopping his recitation with a wave of her hands. "Wait, wait! I am getting ahead of myself in my questions and I am confused, Severus. You said that He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named came through Harry, or through the runic sigil that is his scar. Why would that beast then need Quirinus?"

It was a difficult, yet succinct question that the medi-witch asked. Snape had wondered the same thing and it had taken most of an evening asking Harry questions about his dreams to come up with a plausible, and very likely answer.

As he and his son spoke, with Harry curled securely against his side on the sofa, the Potions Master learned about his son's angel, Lily, a statue that watched over a pond that held 'evil-looking fish'. Harry's angel had kept the fish in the pond and had 'sent' her son the Dark Man to protect him when stirrings from the fish gave Harry frightening nightmares.

Harry's fingers were nervously playing with the buttons on his father's jacket. Carefully, though, he didn't want to pull off another one. His father might stop his fiddling and in a strange way, it was as comforting as the older man's arm over him.

"When I was ten, I got real sick. There were spots all over my skin so Aunt Petunia said I couldn't go to school and I had to stay in my cupboard. I just felt really worn out, dad, so I slept, mostly. That's when I found out the fish were gone from the pond during the day." He sighed, a slight smile gracing his lips. "It kind of felt nice. Like how a cool breeze makes you want to run in the grass, or go play in the park." Harry grinned, then. "It's like flying." Harry nodded to himself.

"Did the nightmares come back, Harry?" asked Snape as he laced one of his son's fingers with his own. Harry's hand gripped his in reassurance.

"Nope. But, it wasn't because the monster didn't try, dad. You were there.. I mean the Dark Man was." He snuggled more firmly into his father's side and Snape adjusted the afghan coverlet that kept his son's feet warm. "When the angel couldn't hold the fish in the pond, you scared him back with the green light. After awhile, the monster left me alone. Until I got to Hogwarts."

"You do know that the monster is Voldemort, correct, Harry?" Snape felt condescending asking, but he felt it important that his son understood the difference.

Harry gave him a mild scowl, as though the older man ought to know that he was smarter than that. "Voldemort is a monster, Dad. He's a



terrible and scary thing, and he gives me awful dreams, and he hurt the unicorns and the Centaurs, and... and he almost killed my friend!" Harry pulled the afghan up until it almost covered his head. With his voice partially muffled, the boy spat, "Monsters don't deserve names!"

After that, Harry refused to talk anymore and had wrapped his arms around Snape's waist and within the hour the child had fallen asleep that way.

So, Snape explained to Poppy, "It was the abuse at the hands of the Dursleys that caused Lily's protective magic to crack and allowed Voldemort's return as a Fiend, a ghost of evil intent," he repeated with emphasis. "The Fiend was just barely able to exist in a quiescent state within Harry's mind, in a pond as these fish that Harry described as very terrifying to look upon. I believe that as Harry grew older, and the abuse became more physical, Voldemort fed on that and was able to leave Harry and to seek out a compatible host; Quirrell."

"Not that I would wish it," Poppy began, "but why did He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named go after Quirrell when he was already occupying Harry's mind?"

"Simply because Harry is a child, Poppy. As you know he will not come into his full powers until he has reached his majority." She nodded knowingly. The medi-witch had fixed many injuries from students taken by surprise by an increase, or more disheartening, a rare decrease, in their magical power.

"You-Know-Who needed Quirinus' magic," she murmured softly.

"Yes, Poppy, and I believe Voldemort also required an adult body to solidify his presence. A child's body is..." he thought a moment for the right descriptive word. "...transitional."

Poppy couldn't suppress a snort at that thought. A child's body went through growing pains, emotional upheavals, testing of adults, and the worst transition of all, puberty.

For a long moment, both adults were lost in their thoughts until Poppy suggested something that shocked Snape. "I could end it, Severus. I know Quirrell's allergies and it would be easy..."

"No!" snapped Snape in abject shock. His jaw dropped, wondering how in the world this gentle woman, this Healer, could even think such a thing. "Merlin's teeth, Poppy! I would not have you violate your Healer's Oath with... with murder," his voice fell in volume on the last word.

"Severus!" Poppy hissed in warning. "You know it wouldn't be pain... shush!" she ordered at his growl.

"Do not say anymore, Poppy, or I will think you one of those Socratic Angels that are..." his eyes widened, again in shock, as Poppy glared at him with an unapologetic stare. He shook his head sharply. That was a subject he had no wish to dissect, right now. In frustration, he let out a short puff of air. "Killing Quirrell is not the answer. Besides, if that were done, it might send Voldemort back into Harry's mind, or someone else's. We need to discover a way to ultimately destroy Voldemort." Snape did not speak of the Headmaster's shady dealings in regards to the Philosopher's Stone and his distrust of Harry. It was far too complicated to broach with the medi-witch now.

Madame Pomfrey rose to her feet, and to Snape's embarrassment she cupped his cheek in the palm of her hand as she looked down into his eyes. "I am not a Socratic Angel, my dear, and it was a terribly foolish, and desperate suggestion. My only wish is to keep Harry, and you, safe."

Snape gave her the ghost of a worried look. "Then, you will not..?" he glanced one last time at Quirrell.

"My Healer's Oath will remain inviolate." Flustered, Snape's cheeks flushed as the older witch kissed his cheek and then Poppy moved away from him, her starched uniform swishing gently.

Closing his eyes, Snape took out the Migraine Potion and swallowed another dose.

This was going to be an awfully long day.

"You dress up in costumes on Halloween?" asked Draco in wonder as he looked over his textbook.

He, Neville, Hermione, Millicent, and Harry were all in the library sharing one of the large, window seats. A table was in front of them with parchment, quills, ink, and textbooks scattered over its surface.

"It's a Muggle tradition," affirmed Harry.

"What do you dress up as?" asked Neville.

Hermione replied, "Ghosts, goblins, things like that." She ducked her head into her book before she let slip what else Muggles dressed as.

Harry smirked, "They also dress as wizards and witches!" Hermione scowled at him as Millicent, Neville, and Draco all gasped in shock.

"That's just rude!" spat Draco.

"Really," agreed Millicent. "It isn't like we dress up like them."

"But, why?" Neville persisted. "Why do they do that?"

Hermione explained, "It's a way for Muggles to make what they most fear seem less scary. It's like exorcising their fears."

Draco shook his head, "But you said you dressed once as a princess. Those aren't scary, are they?"

Hermione smiled self-consciously, "Well, they're not. The thing is, you can dress up however you like and some kids don't go as something scary, but as something they like. It was only when the tradition first started that Muggles wore costumes of things that scared them. Now, it's... uhm..." she shrugged, "just harmless fun."

Neville shook his head, "It's not smart, Hermione. There are some magical creatures that if you dress up like them, they can get very angry."

"And, you could Summon them," Millicent said darkly.

Hermione and Harry gulped. "Summon them?" asked Hermione warily.

Hermione's dorm mate nodded. "There are old rituals, probably Dark ones, in which you dress up, or wear something of the being you are

trying to Summon. When Polyjuice was first invented by Potions Mistress Estrella Coal she was into Dark Magic and she probably invented it so she could Summon Dark creatures."

They were all silent for a bit after Millicent's explanation. Harry leaned his forehead against the cold window and looked down to see a group of older kids throwing snowballs at each other. Amongst the group was the distinctive ginger hair of the twins, Fred and George. He turned away.

"So, what do you do?" asked Harry. "Draco, you said it was an important holiday, but we're just going to eat food and that's not really special."

Draco put down his book on the table and leaned back in his chair. His eyes swept over his audience to make sure he had their attention. "Halloween was once a harvest festival called Samhaim, which means 'the end of Summer'. We have a "feast of abundance" to symbolise that the end of Summer brought in a good harvest that will feed everyone. At midnight all the candles and torches are lit in order to keep the dead from mistaking our world as theirs. The lights are kept blazing everywhere until the rays of the sun come, thus sending the wandering spirits back beyond the Veil."

"That's... kind of creepy," muttered Harry.

Draco laughed. "Well, hardly anyone believes that part, now, but the lights are still kept on and my father told me that Hogwarts looked like gold when it was all lit up."

Harry smiled, "That's not so creepy, then."

"What is neat, though," added Millicent, "Is that the Veil between life and death is thinner between sundown and sunrise. If you're missing someone that you really love they might come and visit you."

"That's rather nice," nodded Hermione.

Neville had to bring the whole mood down by saying, "Yeah, but what about evil spirits? They can come through, too."

Draco, Harry, and Hermione cast worried glances at each other. Millicent finally spoke up, "But that hasn't happened in ages and besides, Hogwarts is really protected from that sort of thing."

Harry didn't say so, but he didn't think that Hogwarts was all that well protected with a monster on the loose and a three-headed dog on the third floor, and a goofy, smiling Headmaster in charge of everything.

In his quarters about two hours before the party for the lower years began, Snape and Lucius were standing beside an odd, shallow, grey bowl that had a silvery transparent liquid within it. Floating on top of the liquid were milky white, almost misty wisps. The bowl was a pensieve and the wisps were the memories of the Potions Master's meeting with Madame Pomfrey and the Legilimens he performed upon the unconscious Quirrell the night he was found. After they left those two memories, Snape added one more; the discussion he had had with Harry about his dreams, the angel, the pond, and the fish.

Lucius left the pensieve and seated himself in one of Snape's two chairs. Once Snape had replaced the memories in his head, he also sat.

"Thank you for bringing your pensieve," Snape muttered.

"I've been telling you for years that you need to invest in one. Think how useful such a device would be when you attend those boring Potions conventions?" Lucius then stared vacantly at the flames in the fireplace. "I've never seen a damaged magical core, Severus, but even I know that Quirrell's been tortured." He shuddered at the image of a magical core covered in un-healed wounds like a burnt, human limb. At his own memory of Quirrell's mind, Lucius' face went pasty white. Feeling suddenly nauseous and perhaps dizzy, he didn't protest when Snape's cool fingers pressed against the back of his neck and made him lean forward.

"Close your eyes and breathe evenly through your nose," Snape instructed quietly. He knew that Lucius would be feeling the after effects of the memory which included Snape's own feelings of disgust, apprehension, and nausea from when he had looked into Quirrell's mind.

A simple Anti-Nausea Potion would do the same, but Narcissa was very determined that her husband rely upon potions as little as possible. Snape had once made the foolish mistake of arguing with the patrician witch over her prejudice against potions, and to his utter disgust, he had lost. Rather soundly, too. Lucius, of course, had found it eminently funny and had annoyed Snape for days afterwards about the ignominious defeat.

After a long minute, Lucius raised his head and welcomed the glass of fire whiskey that Snape held out to him. He bowed his head simply in thanks before swallowing a few measures of the amber liquid that burned swiftly through him to reside comfortably in his belly. "I think I missed it, but did you find any sense of Quirrell himself in there?"

Snape shook his head and took his chair. He sipped his own fire whiskey, welcoming the slow burn of the alcohol warming his veins. "I did not, and that rather worries me. At some time he is going to regain consciousness and I do not know if we will be facing Quirrell, or Voldemort."

"That is... there was a sense of something unclean, Severus..." Lucius shuddered again and took a second, large swallow of the magical liquor.

"We have felt that sensation before," said Snape flatly as he glanced at his left forearm.

Lucius spared a quick look towards his own forearm where his Dark Mark resided. The summons from the Dark Lord had always felt like an unpleasant touch, a filth of oil, and something deeper, primeval and repulsive. It turned the whiskey a touch sour in his stomach to realise just how close, even through a pensieved memory, he had been to their old master.

"I am appalled at Madame Pomfrey's offer," Lucius tried to say conversationally, yet failed as Snape noted a very slight tremor in his friend's voice.

"It is a pity we could not take advantage of it," Snape said icily, knowing that unemotional taint to his silken tones would steady Lucius' emotions. "Unfortunately, such a simple matter would only

do away with Quirrell. We would still have Voldemort to deal with and I would not wish to return that thing back to my son."

Lucius asked, "And he is gone from Harry? Did you make certain, Severus?"

"I did. Harry allowed me to look into his mind before the memory of our discussion started."

A garden. Snape had thought that Harry's shields might be something simpler, and perhaps to do with flying. The garden was unexpected, though, and should Voldemort ever try to look into his son's mind, the Dark Lord would find it unexpected as well. Glancing down at his son's face, he noted the pleasure that Harry felt at showing the Occlumens shield to his father.

The garden itself was protected by a gated wall of white-wash painted brick. The gate itself, an imposing structure of wrought iron was hidden behind thick growths of ivy. Odd looking ivy with waxen, dark purple flowers. At first, Snape thought the gate, even though cleverly hidden in the tangled web of ivy, was too simple. Were he to try breaking into his son's memories he would have been deterred for a bit by the ivy, but he would have found the gate, and he would have gotten through. Snape soon learned that both the ivy and the iron gate were delaying mechanisms; something he had taught neither boy during their Occlumency lessons. Harry had thought of the subterfuge on his own.

The true labyrinth of his son's mind was in the garden itself. Harry courteously explained how it wasn't just a single flower that protected a memory, but Harry had buried the memories in the roots of flowers, trees, shrubs, on down into the rich, dark soil. Snape had leaned over to touch a rose of electric blue and that's when he caught movement from the purple flowered ivy. The entire garden rustled with the hush of the ivy snaking across the ground as tentative tendrils touched Snape's boot. Harry's hand had gently pulled Snape away from the rose.

"It's the ivy, Dad," Harry said with soft respect.

"A sentry?" asked Snape with astonishment.

"Yeah," Harry smiled down at the tendrils that had menaced Snape's boot. They were lengthening, curling, and several flowers bloomed. A perfume was released that Snape recognised.

"The aroma of the snowbells," Snape gave his son an unrestrained smile.

Harry nodded with a grin. "The ivy can knock you out with the smell, or trip you up, overwhelm you, and..." he peered guiltily up at his father as his voice dropped in timbre, "well, they can strangle you, too."

Snape's eyebrow rose at the guilty expression on his son's face. "What worries you about that aspect, Harry?"

"Strangling. It'll kill someone. Won't it, sir?"

"Only if they believe they shall die, Harry. Any Legilimens that attempts to break into your mind will undoubtedly come out alive." He squeezed Harry's shoulder. "It does not mean that they would not panic, though. Your vine is rather insidious."

"Insidious?" Harry made a note to order that dictionary he'd been meaning to. The more he spoke to his father, he figured, the less he'd be able to understand the man and his big words.

"Dangerous," Snape supplied the meaning. He smirked at Harry and they left the rose, and the vine that was lazily twining its way around the roots of a tree trunk, behind.

"All of that?" Lucius' comment was for that last memory, the tour de force that had been the interior of Harry's mind. "He's only eleven, Severus."

"Before I began teaching Occlumency, Harry was using boxes stored in a cupboard. They were flimsy, some had burst, and there was no organisation to be seen anywhere. The angel statue of Lily was well hidden, though. I did not even know she was there." Snape grimaced as he thought of Harry's relatives. "It was a way for him to cope without losing himself by boxing up and hiding the hurt in the darkness."



Lucius steepled his fingers over his abdomen. "How are Draco's shields?"

"He struggled in settling on something in which to house his thoughts, but he has settled upon a house that is similar to Malfoy Manor," Snape replied. "Our latest lessons have focused on strengthening his visualisation."

"I know it has only been a few days, Severus," Lucius stared, for a moment at the tips of his gryphon leather boots. "Is Draco sleeping all right?"

Snape spoke to Lucius as one father to another, not as the Head of Slytherin House. "I have all the dorms in Slytherin warded with an alarm that allows my prefects to know if someone is not sleeping well. I modified that ward around Draco and Harry's dorm to let me know if their sleep is troublesome," he paused quietly for a moment. "So far, the alarm has been quiet."

"Inform me?" Lucius' voice faded and Snape nodded firmly. Harry had had one nightmare the night of the incident at the Department of Mysteries and he was not fool enough to think that would be the end of them.

Snape stood abruptly. "It is early, yet, Lucius." Snape stretched out his arm as he Summoned his outer robes. "Would you like to accompany me to Surrey?"

A hard and entirely too gleeful gleam glittered wickedly for a moment in Lucius' silvery eyes. He rose to his feet, Summoning his own Winter cloak. "I could use a bracing walk, my friend!"

Dusk had just begun to turn the Halloween sky over Little Whinging, Surrey a greyish tinge. Snow was also starting to fall, but the rush of Muggle children, ostensibly in strange costumes, were not impeded by the fat flakes that foretold of a greater snowstorm to come.

In the midst of the costumes, and at least a dozen bored, yet closely watching parents eyes, neither Lucius nor Snape seemed so odd in their wizard robes. What was odd about the pair was that neither was crowded by costumed, sweets hustling urchins.

Ignoring some of the parental stares, the roaming children, the two wizards made their way to a cookie cutter house where the windows glowed appropriately warm and two jack-o-lanterns sat sentinel at the end of a quaint path of curving brick. A set of children, a small princess, a rather patchy looking frog, and a pirate, were escorted by a brusque teenager looking like a pasty dead man with fake stitches criss-crossing his cheeks and fake blood dripping over his lips. Both wizards sneered at the teenager, who glared back as he passed with the younger children.

Lucius watched the children and teenager, almost with an appalled look upon his face. He didn't turn away until he felt a sharp tug upon his sleeve.

"What is all of this... this ridiculous pageantry, Severus?" asked Lucius, clearly feeling as though he had stepped away from the safety of the familiar and into the backyard of the bizarre.

"This is how Muggles celebrate Halloween," Snape declared shortly. "Just ignore it. We are here."

Lucius turned away from the trick-or-treaters and faced the red-painted door to the Dursley household. Again, that wicked gleam came back as the patrician smiled dangerously. "Unless you need me to, Severus, I shall be quiet. Moral support, as it were."

Snape glared at his friend's smug demeanor and turned back to face the door. He rapped sharply upon the wood with his fisted knuckles.

The door sprung open. "Happy Hallooooo-weee-en!" Petunia Dursley's voice was unpleasantly sing-songy and far too cheerful. She held forth a bowl of wrapped sweets, and she herself was dressed as a tulle bedecked fairy princess in pink.

Snape had a sudden flashback to a Halloween night when he and Lily were nine years old. Lily still liked to dress up, but she and her older sister had gotten into a fight when Lily saw the incredibly ugly, and insulting witch's costume Petunia had brought home from the store for her. It had been such a loud fight between the girls that it had drawn Lea Evans from her kitchen whereupon she had whacked the bottoms of both her daughters with a wooden cooking spoon and sent them, both crying horribly, up to their rooms. Snape had felt just sick at seeing his best friend spanked in such an

indignant manner and was preparing to run all the way home, when Lea, no longer angry, held out a pumpkin and ginger biscuit to the small boy he had been. Taking the peace offering, little Severus had allowed Lea Evans to lead him into her kitchen where they proceeded to make more of the holiday biscuits.

"I suppose you still believe witches have warts, stringy hair, and cackle all day, Tuney," sneered Snape with a sharp scowl. The hated nickname and the realisation that her boyhood nemesis was back, again, made her drop the bowl of sweets.

"VERNON!" she screeched and it took every ounce of self-control Snape had to not wince and hex the obnoxious woman into next week. "Snape!" she nearly spat. "We're done with you and your kind. You have the boy so get out of here!"

"Pet? What's the trouble, dear?" The large whale that was Vernon Dursley lumbered to the front door. Lucius' lip curled in disgust as the smears of chocolate on the man's striped shirt. Vernon's piggy eyes beaded narrowly and he snorted angrily. "Get away from my house, you bloody freaks!"

Snape's wand was out in a blink and its point struck hard against the whale's neck. Behind the two wizards, a new group of children that had come up the walk let out terrified shrieks. Lucius turned to them, giving the youngsters his most charming and disarming smile.

"Quite all right, little ones," he assured them. "A jest between friends." He pulled a handful of what appeared to be galleons from his pocket, but he had surreptitiously Transfigured them into harmless, gold foil covered chocolate. The children would never know that the foil was truly gold. He handed out the chocolate and shooed the happy children down the walk, then joined Snape who was now pushing the offensive Muggles back into their own house at wand point. Lucius closed the front door and muttered several spells that would keep what Snape did silent, and keep nosey neighbors from intruding.

Lucius then went into the living room, sneered at its rather cheap décor, and then smiled like a predator down at the Dursleys who sat upon their chintz couch glaring up at the Dark Man.

Snape briefly removed his glare from the Muggles and glanced at Lucius. Lucius gave him a nod, and then he walked over to the badly brown shaded recliner and Transfigured it into a more elegant, and comfortable leather chair. He gave it a quarter turn so he could properly watch the proceedings. He seated himself and elegantly crossed a leg over his knee and leaned his snake-headed cane against his thigh.

"What do you want, Snape?" demanded Petunia furiously.

"Justice," he declared flatly. "I would... like... to kill you both. For Lily and for what you did to Harry."

Vernon interrupted with an indignant shout, "We took him in! Out of the goodness of our souls and the brat told horrid lies about us!"

Snape's eyebrow rose perceptibly. "My son has no reason to lie to me. Especially not after I found him shoved into a cupboard," Snape flicked his wand and the door to the cupboard under the stairs slammed open so forcefully, the wood cracked. Vernon glowered and Petunia let out a squeak. He moved closer. Lucius felt a frisson of old fear trickle down his spine at the glower on his friend's face. It was the one of cold stone that Lucius had seen during meetings before the Dark Lord. He then glanced towards the stupid Muggles who were too dense to realise that they had a Death Eater (ex) who could snap them both like dried twigs.

"Bruised!" Snape's wand flicked over Petunia and she let out another yelp as she felt as though something hard smacked down upon her hand. She yanked the mysteriously injured hand up and cradled it against her thin chest.

"Bloodied!" Another flick of the wand set a vicious slice from Vernon's ear to the corner of his mouth. It wasn't a deep cut, but the blood trickled freely down to the man's chin. Vernon goggled in shock ridiculously as his fingers recoiled as a drop of blood dropped to his hand.

"Broken!" A harsh swipe of his wand and Lucius winced at the twin sound of bones cracking. Vernon let out a grunt, gripping his chest where a rib had impossibly bent and cracked. Petunia was weeping copiously over her bruised hand and now shattered wrist.

"Why are you tormenting us?" wailed Petunia.

"Because you tormented Harry!" he thundered as flecks of spittle flew from his mouth and landed on them both. His voice dropped to a hideous hiss. "He was Lily's son! Your nephew, Petunia. Family. Yet you could not be bothered to once give him a kind word, solace after a bad dream, or food? And you, you great pig!" Snape centered his attention on Vernon who now had his arms crossed over his chest in pain from the cracked rib. "I saw some of Harry's memories. You smiled when you hit him." He stepped even closer. "Does your wife know that inflicting pain upon my child..." his voice lowered dangerously, "was more satisfying to you than her bony frame ever was?" His eyes glittered with a hawkish secret.

"What?" Petunia immediately forgot the pain throbbing in her wrist. She turned to her husband, shocked at the implication.

Snape turned solicitously to Petunia and asked, a bit conversationally, "I believe you remember Edward Blunt, Petunia? Your son's first friend? He lived right next door, did he not? Why were you never curious about his family's abrupt departure from Privet Drive?" He straightened and fastidiously swept at invisible lint on the cuff of his sleeve. "Just as when we were children, you never could be bothered about anyone else except yourself. Poor Edward. He is the same age as your Dudley. I wonder how he is doing these days."

Petunia had been staring in puzzlement at Snape. At a strangled gasp from her husband, she turned to him sharply. "What's he talking about, Vernon?" she demanded.

"It's nothing!" Vernon cracked out hoarsely. He glared at Snape. "I didn't touch the boy! His father just got a job and they left!" Deep red shame suffused the man's cheeks.

"Edward was a fast, little boy," Snape scowled in disgust at the whale. "Just as my Harry was. Thankfully, my child is a wizard and his magic kept you from doing more than just beating him." Snape's wand found its way to Vernon's jowly neck again. "It is a pity that despite how fast Edward was, even he was not fast enough to escape a great, piggish lout such as you, Dursley."

Lucius, who had been content to sit back and enjoy the suffering of these miserable excuses for human beings, had sat up at this revelation. His contact here in the Muggle world had not told him of the blubbing man's predilections and he felt angry enough to cut the man to pieces then and there himself.

Petunia rounded upon her husband as shock stained her cheeks pink. "Vernon? What is he saying?"

Vernon's teeth ground out, "He's making it up, Pet. You know how all those freaks lie and stick together." He moved closer to his wife and smiled softly, lovingly as he touched her hand.

Snape smirked in triumph as Petunia jerked instinctively away from her husband. Her gaze then landed upon Snape and she demanded roughly, "I want proof," she hissed in a whisper.

The Potions Master inclined his head graciously. "Little Edward is in recovery, Tuney." He glowered down at the pinch-faced woman whose skin had turned a sickly yellow. "Fortunately, your corpulent excuse for a spouse was prevented from committing a worse abuse upon Harry, Tuney, but do not think you are exonerated. It was you that starved Harry to the point where it will take years for his body to fully catch up. It was you that struck his head with a bloody frying pan and damaged his eyesight. It was you who were meant to keep him safe and you let that..." he turned his darkest and most hateful scowl upon Vernon. With a decidedly vicious smile, he finished, "You let that monster near my child." He then straightened to his full and imposing height. "Mark my words, Petunia Evans Dursley. You are no mother, and you never will be again." He then turned his gaze to Vernon who quailed, and rightly so, in abject fear.

A knock upon the front door startled the Dursleys and Snape rounded angrily upon his friend who was supposed to have warded the property against intrusion. Lucius swiftly rose to his feet and flashed a placating smile at Snape. "Quite all right, Severus," he said as he un-tucked a small amulet from his pocket. He held it out long enough for Snape to understand what it meant. "I'll just go and answer the door, shall I?" he nodded solicitously at the Dursleys and quickly made his way to the front door.

Upon opening the door, the red flash of a light began to pulse against the inner walls of the house. A man with greying, brown hair was on the doorstep. He nodded grimly to Lucius.

"Mr. Malfoy, I got your message." He tapped a similar amulet hidden under his shirt. "I have with me the local constabulary. Representatives of Children's Services were dispatched after your call and they have already picked up Dudley Dursley from a friend's house. I'm sure they're explaining the matter of his parents to him now."

"Very good, Stanley," nodded Lucius. "I want to be kept apprised of the young boy's situation as I do believe that at some point the cousins may wish to repair their rift."

"Certainly, sir. Shall I...?" he glanced over his shoulder to indicate the four policemen who stood grouped together, ready for anything.

"In a moment. I'd like you to meet my friend." Lucius ushered Stanley into the house, but left the door open. "I gather you and he have been corresponding?"

Stanley nodded, and when he saw Snape he stuck his hand out. For a moment Snape stared at the man's outstretched hand, and then he shook it firmly, and quickly. "Mr. Snape, I presume?"

Snape nodded. "And you are Henry Aloysius Stanley?" he asked. Snape threw a questioning glance at Lucius who merely gave him a satisfied smirk.

"Detective Stanley of Scotland Yard, Mr. Snape," his heels clicked together as he gave a sharp, half-bow. From the interior of his coat he produced a folder that he handed to the Potions Master. "The additional information you asked for. The police have my copy. That is yours."

Snape flipped through the folder and his teeth grit dangerously after seeing just three young, and innocent faces, one of which was the Edward Blunt he had told Petunia about. He slapped the folder shut, shrank it, and tucked it into his inner pocket. "What you told me, Det. Stanley, about his kind and your prisons?" Snape asked, making sure that Vernon Dursley could overhear.

Stanley nodded grimly, "It's a bit of 'honor amongst thieves', Mr. Snape. Children are sacred vessels and his kind," the detective shot Vernon an icy glare, "don't fare well in prison. Short life span, ya' know?"

"And Mrs. Dursley?" asked Snape.

The detective sighed. "Well, without your boy's testimony, they can only use the evidence of the son. Most she'll get is time at the woman's halfway house and some community service. Mr. Malfoy asked that I make certain Dudley Dursley is never returned to her, regardless of the outcome of her trial and punishment. Took some doing, but young Dursley will have a fine family to take care of him and the counseling he needs to straighten him out."

Petunia exploded when she heard the way they were speaking about her son. Ice arced through her heart as she screeched, "You can't take my son away!" She rose like a cobra to launch herself at Snape, but he cast a Binding Spell quicker than she could reach him and she fell, unceremoniously, to the floor. Imprecations of a decidedly foul nature spilled from her lips. A Stunning Spell put an end to that.

Snape then did the same to Vernon. He then tapped his pocket. "Detective, these children...?" he asked uncertainly.

The detective turned to Lucius. Lucius, who would demand later to see the contents of the damning folder, spoke up, "Whatever they need, Stanley. I'll take care of it."

Stanley nodded. "Yes, sir." He clapped his hands together. "Well, now, if you two gentlemen are finished, I'd like to get this mess all mopped up."

Snape nodded. "Thank you, Detective." Snape gave the monstrous whale a last glance. Over his shoulder he snapped, "I want to know of his... demise." He then vanished in a blur of black robes.

Lucius stepped over to the Scotland Yard detective. "Magic never ceases to amaze me," Stanley said a bit wistfully.

Lucius chuckled, "You are a Squib of honor and with your own great talents, Stanley. Now, I have a Halloween party to attend." He



gathered his robes about himself. "You'll receive a bonus, Stanley. You ought to take David on holiday, I think."

Stanley cracked a smile. "David's always had a desire to go to Greece, so maybe for this Christmas. Thank you, Mr. Malfoy." With a spin, and a crack of displaced air, Lucius vanished as well.

"...so well, Hermione was talking to Nearly Headless Nick, and he said..."

"Sir Nicholas," corrected Snape.

Harry was seated on the edge of his father's bed as Snape stood in front of a tall, oval shaped mirror, and buttoned the deep green velvet waistcoat he had just put on.

"Sir Nicholas said it's a Deathday Party and since he still likes Hermione, even though she's in Slytherin now, he said me and Draco and Hermione could all go as his guests." Harry cocked his head sideways to look at his father and the coat he had just put on. It was tailored, fitting his frame perfectly, but Harry noted a problem with it. "It's still open."

Snape frowned at his son's reflection and gave his suit a studied glare. "What's still open?"

"Your coat. Actually, maybe it doesn't fit you since it doesn't look like it can close," Harry observed, tipping his head the other way as though that might help his scrutiny.

Snape smirked sharply. "Clearly you know nothing of fashion, Harry. This particular suit is designed with an open coat so that the waistcoat can be shown." He ran his hands down the wide, dark green velvet lapels to the hem of the waistcoat. Snape tugged it, to adjust it, and then regarded his reflection. Stretching out his right arm, he tugged down on the white, starched cuff, then Summoned a silver cuff link in the shape of a snake, and attached it. He did the same with the other cuff.

"I like the green," said Harry. He was now lying on his side, his knees comfortably bent. "How come you always wear black, Dad?"

"I like black," Snape replied simply. "Besides, my shirts are white."

"I like purple, except to wear as robes," he rolled to his back and stared up at the canopy of his father's bed. "The Headmaster has some purple robes with ducks on them." Harry grimaced. "Hermione thinks they look silly, but Draco says the Headmaster doesn't have any fashion sense."

"I'd have to agree with Draco," Snape said as he checked his cuffs before Summoning his dress robes.

"Is fashion sense something important to have?" Harry now had his feet up and was squinting at them so it looked like his feet were flat against the underside of the canopy.

"I don't know about fashion sense, son, but it does help to have an awareness of what you wear and who you will be wearing it around." Snape swung the black robes with a dark glint of green thread embroidered on the hem and sides with a flourish and settled the robes onto his shoulders.

"So you wear black to scare everyone?" Harry deduced.

"I wear black because it is my favourite colour!" Harry let out a yelp as slim fingers tickled his ribs. He fell into a quick paroxysm of giggles before his father gave him a hand up. Harry's feet thumped to the floor and Snape struck one of his most fearsome, lecturing Potions Professor poses. "Well, do I pass muster?"

Harry smirked as he regarded his father. "You muster well, Dad."

Snape sniffed imperiously. "I should say so." With his hand to his son's back he ushered Harry into the living room. "Sit down and go wait for your friends, Harry."

Harry pouted, "But, they're gonna be fifteen minutes, dad. Can't I do something?"

"No. If you do something you will then either make a mess or wear the mess," Snape chided, wondering to himself just when he had begun sounding like his mother. With a slight shrug of his shoulders he seated himself and Summoned one of the potions periodicals he'd been reading. Out of the corner of his eye he saw Harry slump dejectedly on the sofa. "Fetch a book and read it," he ordered softly.

Harry jumped up and trotted over to one of the bookcases. Some of the books his father had read as a kid were on the lowest shelf and Harry squatted down so he could peruse the titles. There were the Hardy Boys, Huck Finn and Tom Sawyer, and more. Wizard authors had penned such titles as The Adventures of Young Flamel, Portsmythe's Wine Stain – A Murder Mystery, and Boggarts in the Dungeons which was a series of horror stories that included five books.

"Dad?"

"Hmm?"

"Is The Old Man and the Sea interesting?" asked Harry as he removed a slim volume.

"I thought so," replied Snape not removing his eyes from his magazine.

"What's it about?" Harry was intrigued by the cover which had a painting of an old man, in a small boat, on a turbulent ocean.

"It is the adventure of an old fisherman and his battle with a giant marlin. A fish," he answered, then lowered his magazine. "Ernest Hemingway wrote the story in 1952 and it is considered one of his greatest works. I rather enjoyed Hemingway as a boy. His stories were adventurous and I always found it hard to put down his books."

That was a good enough endorsement for Harry. He took the book back to the sofa, settled into the corner, opened the book, and began to read. He smiled slightly after a few minutes when he discovered that the book was illustrated with wizarding drawings.

Snape watched his son for a moment. He noted to himself that the boy's hair was getting rather too long; several inches below his shoulders and it had become a concealing curtain much like his own. There was still some of James Potter's texture to it, though. A slight rebellion at the ends as they didn't rest in one line but drifted here and there while some groups rose up in a slight curl, and some were stubbornly straight.

Healthy colour stayed in Harry's cheeks now and he had finally put on enough weight that although his frame was still slim he no longer looked as though a strong wind would pick him up and carry him away.

The Potions Master, father to the Boy-Who-Lived, hoped that, if not now his son would see a much happier future.

Fifteen minutes wasn't very long, but for Harry, absorbed already by the adventure of The Old Man and the Sea, he hadn't realised the time passing and so he was startled when a gentle chime warned of approaching guests. Harry jumped up from the sofa but was caught by his lightning quick father who directed him to take his book to his bedroom.

"I will let your guests in," said Snape as he went to the door. Harry sprinted to his room with his book and was back in the living room just as Hermione and Draco were allowed in by Snape.

Hermione was very pretty in a dress of peach satin and lace that went to her ankles. On her feet were dainty, patent leather flats of a rosy colour. The spell Snape had taught her to smooth the bushiness from her brown hair had been put to good use giving her soft waves that fell freely to below her shoulder blades.

"You have done very well with the Hair Taming Charm, Miss Granger," complimented Snape. He then gently nudged his son who had been staring at Hermione.

Harry snapped out of his daze at his father's slight push and grinned as his cheeks blushed, "You look really pretty, Hermione."

Hermione blushed sweetly and Draco, dressed in his finest robes of royal blue, puffed up proprietorially and nodded, "Mother bought Hermione the dress as a surprise." He then smiled proudly. "All the girls squealed, but Hermione didn't because she's got class."

Snape's eyes warmed with a touch of mirth, although his expression remained stern, "Indeed Miss Granger does. Now, Mr. Malfoy, Mr. Potter..."

Harry shook his head and interrupted softly, "It's Mr. Snape, Dad. You said I could change my last name, right?" Sometimes his father

addressed him still after James. He didn't mind the Potter name, and had every intention to take it back in some form, someday, but for now, Harry really wanted to be a Snape. It made him feel less like the Boy-Who-Lived.

"That I did, Mr. Snape. Do forgive me if I slip now and then." Harry beamed. "Now, as I was about to say, I want you both to be the gentlemen of Slytherin I expect you to be. For tonight the rules of the common room extend to the Great Hall. However, as I told the other Snakes, you are to be on your best behavior towards the other Houses. Should there be a problem, what should you do?"

Harry replied, "Get you, sir."

"Or Professor Sinistra," added Draco.

Snape then focused his gaze on Hermione. "And you, Miss Granger. I doubt I have to remind you to be a lady?"

"No, sir," she replied, a slight blush to her cheeks. "I'll be good."

With a swish of his robes, he left his quarters followed by three, little Snakes.

The Halloween Feast for the lower years, first through third years, was held in the Great Hall which had been festooned with heavy cobwebs, pumpkins and Jack-o-Lanterns with a myriad of fierce and ridiculous faces, flitting bats, and miniature witches and wizards flying through the drapes of cobwebs madly.

The House tables were replaced with a single table that was covered with an orange and black linen tablecloth, and a tapestry runner down the center of the table that reflected much of the décor in the Great Hall. Orange and black dinner sets lined the two edges of the long table in front of gold chairs upholstered in black satin. The two ends of the table were for the two chaperones, Professors Severus Snape and Aurora Sinistra. Places had been included for the Malfoys towards the center of the long table directly across from two other chairs.

Snape had expected a chair for Dumbledore towards the center of the long table, but he wondered who the chair beside the Headmaster's might be for. The Headmaster arrived then, escorting

Professor Sinistra upon one arm. The petite, and usually unassuming Astronomy teacher, had dressed in a black gown of silk that split below the waist to reveal an orange underskirt. Her raven black hair, usually kept up in a functional, tight bun, hung loose to her waist and sparkled with tiny gems that made him think of the stars against the inky backdrop of the night sky.

Dumbledore led the youngest teacher on staff over to Snape and he smiled, like a waggish matchmaker, thought Snape, at the two teachers.

A time or two Snape had considered getting to know Aurora Sinistra a bit better. Although she was quite short, standing she just barely stood a little above Snape's elbows, he had thought her size charming. Sinistra was also not a skinny witch like those whose images populated the silly rag, *Witch Weekly*. She was plump, with decently, generous curves, and a pleasantly demure smile that complemented them.

The problem with getting to know the young witch were her reclusive tendencies. One night of the week she did have midnight practicals, but the rest of her classes for the week were during the day. For some unfathomable reason, the young witch kept to her tower chambers and rarely came to the Great Hall for meals. The only time Snape really had any chance to see her was during staff meetings where her social time, before and after the meetings, was spent huddled with Minerva, Hooch, Poppy, Pomona, and Charity Burbage. Snape had no desire to interrupt the gossipy hens just to elicit conversation from the young witch. It wasn't long before he just gave up his intentions, and concentrated on his Snakes, his potions, and teaching.

And, now that he had Harry in his life, that last thing he needed to complicate matters was a... a girlfriend. Snape couldn't stop the sneer that graced his face, and Sinistra left the Headmaster's side to claim her place at the end of the table without a word to him.

"Really, Severus," chided Dumbledore. "Must you always be so unpleasant?"

Not wishing to explain that his thoughts had merely slid uneasily over the juvenile appellation of the word 'girlfriend' and not at

Professor Sinistra herself, Snape merely replied waspishly, "Yes." He then strode to his chair and plunked himself down into it.

He hated Halloween.

The Malfoys arrived, rather expectantly, last so that their entrance would be the most memorable.

Lucius wore a dove grey suit that hearkened back to almost a century ago for wizarding fashion. His trousers were crisp and straight and complemented by matching spats over his highly polished black, patent leather shoes. Over a starched white shirt with perfect cuffs and a highly defining collar he wore a splendid vest of red velvet and a cravat of black silk. A long coat, that fell in a graceful line to just below his knees, finished the suit.

Narcissa, though, managed to outshine her husband in a pale blue silk gown that was perfectly highlighted by defining decorations of what could only be small diamonds. Her pale blonde hair, usually perfectly coiffed in some sort of up-style, was allowed to fall loose in soft waves down to her waist. A pale blue diamond in a heart shape adorned her throat.

Snape suppressed a chuckle as he noted the slightly envious looks upon the girls faces, and the appreciative glances from most of the boys. Draco appeared unabashedly proud at seeing his parents, and Harry thoughtfully elbowed the boy to divert his insipid attention with an amused smirk. Hermione sighed at the sight of the well-dressed witch and wizard.

Dumbledore welcomed the Malfoys and indicated the two chairs on the other side of the table for them. Snape had already made certain that his two prefects would flank the Malfoys. Tara Anglaise was awed with having Narcissa beside her. Gordon Billock shook hands with Lucius and for once brought all of his etiquette training to the fore. This was noticed by the young man's on-again, off-again girlfriend, Orenicia.

Once the lower years were all assembled, most staying with others of their House, Dumbledore rose from his ornate chair and smiled pleasantly at all of the students. Snape simply scowled until he caught a demure, and blushing glance from Sinistra at the other end

of the table. His lips thinned and he took an unnecessary sip of the water in his crystal goblet.

"A happy Halloween to all of you, children!" intoned the Headmaster as he spread his arms wide and then drew them back together over his abdomen. "The elves tell me that all of your favourites have been prepared and there are puddings to dazzle and delight. Professor McGonagall has graciously allowed you her gramophone for this evening's musical entertainment," he swept a hand towards the large, hand-crank, record playing device that took up the whole corner behind Snape. The Headmaster grinned, "I'm sure that many of you will be pleased to know that I have acquired records from three of the musical groups that I hear are currently popular among the young folk, so I am certain you will enjoy it."

Snape scowled bitterly. If it wasn't classical music, then it was trash and it only gave him a headache. He lightly touched his robes inner pocket to make certain that his migraine potion resided there. The slim bottle was neatly tucked away.

The Great Hall echoed pleasantly with the brief noise of speculation on what wizarding groups were represented by the collection of gramophone records the Headmaster brought. Dumbledore meant to speak more, but he patiently waited for the noise to die down. It didn't. Snape slapped his hand down, hard, upon the table's surface, effectively bringing silence to the Great Hall. The Headmaster gave his Potions professor a gracious nod, and then continued with his speech.

"As I intimated earlier this week, I have some wonderful news for all of you. I have found my new Deputy and he has consented to take on the position of Head of Gryffindor House as well." There was a smattering of applause from the Gryffindor students who were eager to learn who their new Head might be. "Now, since our Defense Against the Dark Arts instructor was recently injured, the new Deputy will be taking on the task of teaching that class." Once Dumbledore knew he had everyone's attention, including the exasperated and impatient attention of Snape, he finished, "Please, do welcome my new Deputy Headmaster, Professor Remus Lupin!"

Snape felt his stomach plummet to his feet like lead as he saw Remus Lupin, one-fourth of the old Marauders, friend to James Potter and Sirius Black, enter through the Great Hall doors. His



hands tightly gripped the arms of his chair as his dark eyes bored into the figure of the sandy-haired man, who had a touch of grey at his temples and small scars marring his altogether overly-pleasant face. His robes were beige and brown wool tweed, and several years out of style. Snape watched as Lupin made his way to stand beside the Headmaster.

Lupin courteously acknowledged Sinistra who, stupid female, blushed under the man's brief attention. The ex-Marauder then focused his gaze upon Snape. His smile was friendly, respectful even, but Snape glowered, hatefully and was pleased to see the other man's expression droop guiltily. That was short-lived as Lupin's amber eyes settled upon Harry, and the wizard smiled, beatifically, at the small boy. Rightfully so, the unexpected attention made Harry wary and he looked to his father in question. Snape nodded shortly, his gaze conveying the message that they would speak later. It was enough for Harry who promptly ignored the new teacher's unwelcome attention, and went back to a murmured conversation with his friends.

Snape centered his scrutiny upon Dumbledore. He did not censor the anger that boiled in his gaze at this appointment. Any kindness the old man had bestowed upon the Potions Master in the past the younger wizard buried those memories, harshly. As of this moment, he had had it with the damned old man and Snape made certain that the Headmaster not only saw his disapproval and disappointment, but felt it. Dumbledore did flinch. He clearly saw the brief expression of betrayal on the younger wizard's face. Instead of capturing Snape's dark gaze, to possibly apologise, the Headmaster simply looked away and bestowed the indulgent smile the old man had reserved for the Marauders when Snape had been a student.

Snape was inwardly vicious with the hurt that bristled at the Headmaster's slight. He vanished the useless goblet of water and conjured a crystal tumbler of brandy. He ignored Dumbledore's glance of disapproval and did not see the look of concern that flashed across the face of Lucius Malfoy. The Potions Master tossed back the brandy and settled his darkest, angriest scowl over everyone.

Snape hated Halloween.

Snape despised Dumbledore.

And Snape absolutely, unequivocally, detested Remus Lupin; the man that had nearly killed him in his sixth year.

Update Aug 5, 2010: Lupin almost attacked Snape in his sixth year. It took me awhile to track this down, but the timeline for Snape on the HP Lexicon says that it was Snape's 6th year and he was 16 when this occurred. I originally had 6 then changed it to 5 but how now put it back to 6. Apologies for the confusions.

A/N: This was a terribly tough chapter to write. I have never done outlines for stories before; preferring to write on the fly, and with this story I cannot do that. This chapter got away from me. In truth, Moldy Voldy rather hijacked it and took everyone into a place where they weren't supposed to be. It was two days writing, and five days fixing it. Is it any wonder I'm not so fond of bleach-face?

Do let me know what you think about what happened with Quirrell. Please ask me your questions, if you have them, and speculate as you wish. I hope that the meeting between Poppy and Snape clarified just what Harry's scar is. I will not be dealing with Horcruxes in this story. Dumbledore is being obstinate in continuing to refer to it as a curse scar, and in his complicity in bringing Voldy back.

And, what did you think of Albus' new Deputy?

Thank you to everyone who wrote to me about their children and validated for me that I was writing the children in this story true. I bow to your wisdom, honored parents.

If anyone wishes to illustrate this story, please do so. I have in my profile a link to the image I created of Harry's angel.

Friday, Nov. 1, 1991

Severus shouldn't have been caught off guard but he had been somewhat distracted. He had overheard James Potter asking 'his girl' Lily to Hogsmeade for the weekend. Although his and Lily's friendship had ended last year, it still hurt, every single day, to see her with Potter; their heads close as they spoke things only to be heard between them.

The assignment had been to turn beetles into jeweled brooches and before he could dodge the prank, Black had sent a dozen of the beetles like a small army to swarm over his boots and ankles. The beetles were Scarabs and they 'bit' but with their pincer-like mandibles. It was painful and Severus reacted instinctively by aiming his wand at Black and Blasting him with a mild Blasting Hex. It was Potter who countered with a Skin Rash Jinx that had Severus itching like mad. That gave Black the opportunity to ready himself with a Blasting Hex, but McGonagall had intervened.

It was little consolation to Severus that they all lost points and all received detention.

Detention with McGonagall hadn't been terrible and thankfully he had not had to share it with Potter or Black. He did get a lecture and knew that the older woman, once more, was disappointed with him, and then she set an essay for him.

Now released, Severus needed a walk before dinner. The air outside the castle was bracing, welcoming, and he strode with confidence through the lowering shadows on the grounds. He was making his way to the Standing Stones when he saw three, familiar figures running across the grounds. They were headed towards the vicious tree known as the Whomping Willow. His curiosity piqued, Severus silently went after them. They were obviously up to something and he meant to discover what it was.

Snape twisted helplessly in his bed. The blankets and sheets trapped him as he was captured within the nightmare of the past. He tried to call out to his younger self, to stop him, but it came out as an anguished whimper.

The rat, Peter Pettigrew had disappeared somewhere, but Severus didn't really care about him. Potter and Black had vanished into a

hole in the tangle of roots beneath the Whomping Willow. Something had stopped its wavering branches and he had to admit he was a bit disappointed in not witnessing either boy getting thrashed by the evil tree. A creak of branches warned him that it was about to start moving again, and so he sprinted. Severus reached the dark hole just as a branch of the Whomping Willow swished behind him, just missing him.

Diving into the hole, Severus could not see and tripped over a root. He was sent rolling down further into the depths and was chagrined to find himself at the feet of Sirius Black. He couldn't see Potter and wondered if he was hiding in the shadows.

"Snively Snivellus!" crowed Black. "Are you here to see the djinn, too?" He snickered at some private joke as Severus scrambled to his feet and stepped away from the black haired boy.

"What djinn?" he demanded.

Black's eyes glittered with conspiratorial glee, "They say that a trapped djinn lies ahead in the tunnel, dunghead. Whoever releases it gets whatever they wish!"

Severus' eyes narrowed. A small, deep down part of him was excited by the legend of a trapped genie, but on the surface, it was Black relating the tale and the young 6th year Slytherin knew better than to trust anything that idiot Gryffindor told him.

"You're lying, Black," snarled Severus.

"So what if I am?" Black replied snootily and glanced vainly at his fingernails. "Go away then. I'll release the djinn and all my wishes'll come true!"

Severus was about to turn away, but a deep, low howl of pain came from the furthest end of the tunnel. "What was that?" demanded the thin boy.

Black snickered, again, and whispered, "That's the djinn. Tell you what, Snively. I'm feeling generous, so why don't you go and free the genie?"

"Why would you offer that?" Severus asked, immediately suspicious.

"Well, I'm rich so I've got everything I want, and you're not," sniped Black.

Severus scowled at the little show-off. "You're scared of it," he declared.

Black frowned. "No I'm not!"

Making a sudden decision, Severus pushed past Black and went down into the tunnel. He cast Lumos so he could see.

The tunnel was treacherous with twisting tree roots on the ceiling, the walls, and the floor. In some places it was cramped, and he had to bend down so as not to hit his head. At other times the tunnel widened and here Severus would pause, waving the light on his wand about. He knew Potter was here. The moron was probably going to jump out and try and scare him.

A high-pitched, pained yowl, made the hair on the back of Severus' neck stand up, and for just a moment he questioned his foolishness for being in the dark tunnel. Something was trapped, though. And, it was in pain. Black thought it was funny and some stupid, Gryffindor adventure. Severus forged ahead. He wasn't thinking of releasing a genie for some gain; he was going to release the genie because it was hurting.

Finally at the end of the tunnel, Severus was puzzled by the appearance of a heavy door. Something heavy thumped against it. His knees shook, but he was going to show Black how brave he was. He lifted his wand and incanted, "Alohomora!"

Harry was asleep in his father's quarters, in his room. Snape had permitted it since Draco had been allowed to sleep with his parents in the visitors quarters. The Potions Master had given him just a small portion of Dreamless Sleep Potion and he would have slept just fine throughout the whole night, but something outside of dreamless sleep woke him.

Sitting up in bed, he rubbed the sleep from his eyes and felt for his glasses on the narrow night table. Once they were on, he studied the shadows in his room. For a moment there was only silence. With

a huff, Harry decided he'd just go to the loo. He had partaken of just about every juice that had been offered at the feast.

Leaving his bedroom, he quietly padded down the hall to the bathroom, slipped inside, and took care of his business. As he was leaving, he heard a mournful cry from his father's bedroom and he froze. Moving as quietly as possible, he placed his ear against his father's door.

"Nooooooooo!"

Harry gulped at the sound of such fear, such agony coming from his father's bedroom. His knees shook and a part of him wanted to run back to his bedroom and dive under the covers, but he couldn't. Hadn't the Dark Man held him when he had nightmares? Hadn't it been the Dark Man who rescued him from the awful Dursleys and then adopted him?

Putting his hand on the doorknob, he twisted it, and slowly pushed the door open.

Severus put his hand on the bent doorknob, and against everything that was inside him and telling him to run back down the tunnel, he ripped the door open.

AWWWROOOOOARRRRRROOOOWWW!

The face of a thousand nightmares roared at the skinny 6th year student. Brown, filthy hair, wicked gold eyes, and jaws, open to show rows of sharp teeth glistening with hungry drool. And claws! Claws of some demon and they swiped at Severus. Something pushed him backwards where his head knocked viciously against a hard root.

"CLOSE SESAME!" The door slammed shut and the werewolf let out an angry howl just as Severus felt his wrist painfully grabbed by someone.

"C'mon Snape! That door isn't going to hold Remus forever and he's smelled you!"

His wrist still being held a strong survival instinct made him follow his rescuer without question. When he tripped over roots, he was

dragged back to his feet, painfully. He only realised that his rescuer was James Potter when they burst forth from the hole and the tunnel vanished from around them.

"The tree!" shouted Severus as he pulled Potter to his side. A swiping branch just missed both boys. Another branch, though, was coming in the other direction and James pushed Severus so hard they were both rolling away from the Whomping Willow.

When they were out of danger, Potter, kneeling beside Severus who was on his back, leaned over him. "You all right, Snape?"

"No! I'm not all right, Potter!" he shouted. "That was... that was..." he couldn't say it. That was Lupin? And then, he heard the laughter behind him. He did his best to rise to his feet, but he was bloodied and bruised and he hurt terribly.

Black was laughing, belly-laughing, and pointing at Severus. "Look at Snivellus, James! He pissed himself! Baby!"

"Sirius! You idiot!" exploded James. "What did you do?"

Righteous and vicious anger boiled inside of Severus, and he strode forward two steps. He landed the hardest punch ever right into Black's face. There was a horrible crunch, of the Gryffindor boy's nose breaking, and a terrible spray of blood cascaded down his face. Black began to cry at the pain and Severus stomped away. The Headmaster had no choice but to expel Black now!

Harry slapped his hands over his ears as his father let out a terrified yell. The older man sat straight up, his wand, somehow in his hands, as he Blasted the doors off the wardrobe.

"Daddy!" shouted Harry. He was afraid, too, but he wasn't going to run away. "Daddy! It's me! Your Harry!"

Snape dropped his wand in shock as he looked down into the frightened face of his son. "Harry?"

The little boy nodded. "Are you... are you okay?" He asked tentatively.

Snape leaned over and drew Harry onto his lap and hugged him fiercely. Harry let out a yelp at the crushing embrace, but he wrapped his arms around his father's neck and hugged him right back.

"It's okay, Daddy," Harry's voice soothed softly into his ear. "I'm here. I'll take care of you." Harry did what his father sometimes did for him, and patted the older man's thin back. He kept talking softly, though his words had become soothing gibberish.

Snape's arms began to relax, but he wouldn't let go of his son. Harry wasn't going to let go, either. Closing his eyes, he buried his nose against his son's neck, smelling the aroma of shampoo, soap, and sleepy boy. After awhile he felt a tentative, gentle kiss upon his cheek and he pulled back slightly.

"Do you think you need some hot cocoa, Daddy?" Harry asked softly.

Snape kissed his child's forehead. "I think I do, Harry. Shall we go make some?"

"Yep." Harry slid out of his father's embrace and off the bed. He then grabbed his father's dressing gown and slippers, being careful to avoid the slivers of wood that had been the doors to the wardrobe. "Here. You go put these on, Dad. I need my robe and slippers, too." He started for the door, but stopped and turned slightly. "I'll be right back, okay?" He assured his father.

Snape couldn't help the warmth that blossomed in his heart at his small son's compassion towards him. "I'll be all right, Harry," He smiled wanly and removed himself from his bed as his son darted out of the door. He put on his dressing gown and his slippers, and then retrieved his wand from the tangled sheets. The wizard scowled at his damaged wardrobe. A Reparo had it back in perfect order, but a shudder wracked his frame as he realised that the door could have been his son. Swiftly, he left behind his bedroom and the nightmare of the past.

Snape's nightmare had awakened Harry and his father about an hour before sunrise. Together they sat at the enchanted window in the living room and watched the sun slowly move up over the horizon to splash its golden light over the fresh snowfall that covered the Quidditch pitch.



Snape had turned the sofa to face the window and then he and his son sat together upon it, each sipping their cocoa.

"Dad?" Harry asked softly. Somehow, this early in the morning, it felt right to talk in gentle whispers.

"Yes, Harry?" Snape replied, his voice just as hushed.

"Did you... uhm... want to talk about your nightmare?" Harry wasn't really sure he wanted to hear about what could scare his father, but Snape always asked him about his nightmares, and although he didn't always want to talk about them, it did, somehow, make him feel better afterwards. He figured he ought to offer his father the same solace.

Snape gave his young son a slight smile. He knew just what Harry was offering and he was touched by it. However, he was hardly going to go into detail about his nightmare, which still sickened him. Possibly worse now that he was an adult and could see the events, and what came after the attack, from an adult perspective.

The Potions Master draped an arm over Harry's shoulder and he sighed as the child's warmth snuggled against his side. A part of him wistfully wished he had known about Harry when he'd been much younger. He knew that these hugs, the quiet moments of comfort, or just company, would vanish as quickly as they had come. Harry would be "too old" for such affection, and Snape would miss it. What a sentimental, old fool he was becoming.

"Was it really bad?" Harry asked when his father hadn't replied to him.

"It was something from the past," Snape said with some little hesitation. Harry looked up at his father earnestly. The trust and concern in those emerald green eyes kept him talking. "When I was sixteen, my sixth year at Hogwarts, something... frightened me... terribly."

"The monster?" Harry asked worriedly.

"No. Not him. There was a monster, though." Snape swallowed stiffly. He wished he could better explain the past to his son, but he

had never wanted to explain it to himself. He'd been nearly killed by a werewolf; Remus Lupin. Sirius Black had not only set him up, he had never apologised, nor, as far as Snape knew, ever regretted what he'd done. And Potter, James bloody Potter had saved his miserable neck!

As terrifying as the past had been, and the nightmare was a rude reminder, what had pained Snape the most had been the Headmaster's blithe reaction. Then, and he supposed, even now. How could Dumbledore hire the wizard who starred in some of his worst nightmares?

Snape pushed all of that away, shutting the bitter memories behind his Occlumens as tightly as he possibly could. He then vanished his empty cup of hot chocolate, slouched down on the sofa, and drew his son closer to him. Leaning his cheek upon Harry's crown, nothing more was said between father and son. It was balm enough to watch the sunrise, in the quiet morning, as somewhere a song bird sang to itself.

As Snape ascended the moving spiral steps up to the Headmaster's office, he was startled to encounter a rather irate Remus Lupin pushing past him. Snape watched the wizard disappear before turning back to the antechamber that led into the Headmaster's office.

Dumbledore was at his desk, but his head was cradled in his arms. "Really, Severus, if you have come to yell at me, I am not in the mood for it." The Headmaster's voice was woefully muffled.

That puzzled Snape further. Albus Dumbledore had never shown such vulnerability before. "Headmaster?" he inquired allowing a strain of his curiosity to be detected.

Dumbledore lifted his head and smiled. It was a poor imitation of those generally supercilious smiles that so annoyed the Potions Master. His spectacles were not on his face, making the old man appear even older.

"Why was Lupin angry?" Snape demanded perspicaciously.

Dumbledore sighed and picked a sherbet lemon out of a nearby tin. He then put his spectacles back on. "A simple difference of opinion, my boy."

Snape knew he would get no more from the Headmaster so he decided to change tactics and to go with his original intent for this visit. "You do realise that if parents, or the Board discovers Lupin's little secret, he will be sacked at once."

Dumbledore's eyes narrowed. "Is it your intention to say something, Severus?"

Snape snorted caustically. "The sheer number of Howlers from parents would utterly bury Hogwarts. I believe I would rather avoid that."

"Excellent!" clapped the Headmaster, and Snape wondered at the older man's remarkable recovery. "Then you have no problem in giving Remus the Wolfsbane."

"I have no choice, you mean," Snape replied flatly.

"Severus, you always have a choice," the Headmaster declared brightly.

Snape glowered knowing how false that declaration was when it concerned Albus Dumbledore. "I will not pay for the ingredients out of my own pocket and the time taken in brewing will be added to those of my teaching hours and House duties."

"Understood, my boy." Dumbledore rummaged through the myriad of paperwork on his desk and pulled out a parchment that he handed to the Potions Master. "A voucher for the year," he explained briefly. "You may contract with whoever you deem is the best apothecary."

Snape glanced down at the parchment before naming an apothecary that was not only expensive, but exclusive in regards to who they dealt with, and would have ingredients unparalleled by any other apothecary. "D'Lisle of France?" Snape posited.

Dumbledore's face lost just a touch of colour, but his need of the werewolf was clearly shown as he nodded, "It is your choice, Severus."

Snape paced away from the desk towards the door, but then stopped. "My... reservations aside, Headmaster, whyever did you hire Lupin?"

Dumbledore steepled his thin fingers, tapping them lightly together. "Did you know that Remus had been living in the Muggle world, Severus? Rather unusual for a werewolf. I had thought he would find others of his kind, such as many do, and integrate himself with a pack." The Headmaster let out a sigh and shook his head.

Snape sneered, but it was without an appropriate amount of malice, "Lupin had a pack. They are either dead, or wishing for death under the cold touch of the Dementors." The Potions Master grimaced as his thoughts briefly touched upon Sirius Black, now in Azkaban where he long ago deserved to be put.

Dumbledore smiled, but Snape thought it was somewhat bittersweet, "Quite so, my boy, quite so."

"Why did he not stay in the Muggle world?" asked Snape, silently wondering how the wizard had dealt with his monthly, furry little problem amongst the Muggles.

"He was a tutor for a minor political liason that worked for the London Ministry and our Ministry. None of the children, four of them, I believe, were magical so he taught them regular courses." Dumbledore rose, walked over to Fawkes, his Phoenix, and stroked the fine, magical bird's crest. "The children grew up, Severus. As all children must." Plucking a book from a nearby shelf, he opened it and spoke without looking up. "The liason referred Lupin to the Board of Governors as they knew a position would soon be available."

The Headmaster turned his back to his Potions professor. Snape, feeling that the meeting was concluded when the Headmaster remained silent, went to the door of the office and placed his hand upon the ornate handle. He froze as the Headmaster's voice reached him.

"He wants to meet with Harry, Severus."

"No." Snape pushed through the door, shut it abruptly, and swept down the spiral staircase.

That evening the Potions Master slumped in his chair and leaned his forehead against his hand. The migraine that throbbed dully behind one eye had been there since that useless meeting with the Headmaster this morning.

He had gone to Dumbledore's office with the intention of letting the old man know just how indignant he was that Lupin was on staff. Not just in one position, but three! It didn't matter to him that Lupin might be qualified, it just annoyed him that the Board of Governors had no idea of what they had allowed into Hogwarts. He knew that Lupin had never registered as a werewolf with the Ministry because it was Dumbledore who had kept the wizard's true nature hidden; from students and staff. There was now, only himself, the Headmaster, and the imprisoned Sirius Black who knew that Lupin was a werewolf.

Snape's thoughts then drifted to when the Headmaster had told Snape that Lupin had been living in the Muggle world. That was unusual for a werewolf since there was that sticky monthly problem when the full moon would change an ordinary wizard into a maddened beast.

How had Lupin managed in the Muggle world? Snape asked himself.

Just as he was about to give in to his migraine and Summon a potion there came a knock on his corridor door. He cast a silent spell that let him know just who was outside his quarters. He glowered when his visitor was identified by glowing letters in the door itself.

Snape strode to the door and snapped it open so he could glare at Remus Lupin, "What do you want?" He demanded harshly.

Lupin smiled gently at the angry, dark man standing in the doorway. "I need to speak with you, Severus, and I think that it would be unwise to do so in the corridor."

With a slight snarl, Snape ushered the man into his living room, but did not ask him to sit down, nor did he offer any sort of refreshment.

Remus took a good look around at the Potions Master's quarters and noted a hand-drawn picture on the wall by Snape's grading desk, and a book upon the sofa: *The Old Man and the Sea*. His wolf senses also picked up a familiar scent, one that was oddly clouded by the scent that was distinctly that of Snape.

"Severus," Lupin began.

"I have not given you leave to use my given name, Lupin," Snape ground out. "To you, I am Professor Snape."

Lupin did not argue, but nodded. "Professor Snape, then. I was told by Albus that you will be supplying me with Wolfsbane. I wanted to thank you for brewing it for me."

"I do not wish to expose my son to the danger of a beast," he replied blithely.

"I would never hurt Harry!" Lupin declared hotly.

"Once a month you lose control of yourself to the mind of a ravening beast, Lupin," Snape's voice cut across the other man's assertion. "You would see my son as a mere snack, just as you would any of the children or staff here so do not try and tell me that you have any sort of control without the potion I will be giving you!"

Lupin hung his head in defeat and Snape swept away from the other wizard. "You are fortunate that I happen to have some on hand for the 21st of this month," he said off-handedly. "However, it is more than three months old, so it may not be as effective as you wish. I suggest you hide in your old haunt that night."

Lupin visibly blanched at Snape's accusatory tone and acidic smirk. The werewolf closed his eyes, as if in pain, as he recalled their sixth year. Drawing in a deep breath, he replied, "I must agree, Professor Snape. It will be the safest place for me."

"If you do not mind, I believe that I will add my own wards that will strengthen the rotting timbers of that shack." Snape made his way to his door and he glanced at it significantly.

"Sev... er, Professor, I also wanted to speak to you about Harry." Snape's eyes narrowed sharply, but Remus pressed on, "I'd like to visit with Harry. I would like for him to know that I was a friend of his father."

Snape's eyebrow rose. "What? No mention of Lily? Were you not her friend as well?"

Remus' cheeks darkened and his gaze skittered away from Snape as he replied, "No. I wasn't."

"What?" Snape frowned since he had not expected such an answer.

"I don't know if you recall, Se... I mean, Professor, that the Marauders sort of disbanded after the... the uhm..."

"The time you nearly killed me?" Snape finished for Lupin bluntly.

Snape took grim pleasure in the fact that the werewolf had the decency to appear embarrassed. Remus completed what he'd meant to say. "Yes. After that I quit hanging around Sirius, James, and Peter." Remus walked to the door and Snape opened it. "Severus, will you allow me to visit with Harry?" He asked before he allowed the dark man to usher him out into the corridor.

"I cannot keep my son from attending the Defense Against the Dark Arts class," Snape bit out. "I can, however, prevent you any other contact with him." Moving menacingly towards the indignant wizard, Lupin backed up out into the corridor. Without another word, the door slammed shut in his face.

Saturday, Nov. 2, 1991

Deputy Headmaster Remus Lupin was nearly buried up to his neck in parchment in the Deputy's office; a tower that was connected to Dumbledore's office by a password protected bridge that stretched between the two towers. Just beneath this office was a spiral staircase that led into Lupin's quarters; four rooms that were a sitting room, a study, a bedroom, and a kitchenette. His office as Head of Gryffindor House was in the same wing as Gryffindor tower was, but Lupin had not yet visited it.

When Lupin had arrived on the evening of Halloween, he had been ready to take on the mantle of Hogwarts new deputy. He had not been prepared to take on the duties of the Head of Gryffindor, nor to substitute for the currently ill Defense Against the Dark Arts teacher. To say that he was annoyed, would be stating his current circumstances mildly. He was incensed. With Dumbledore.

Of course, his anger with Dumbledore didn't matter with how his emotions had been so riled up by that stick-in-the-mud Severus Snape. Lupin would not deny that the man had every right to dislike him, but the dislike had turned to pure, unreasonable, hatred. He would see Harry in class and in the Great Hall for meals, but he would hardly get the visit he so wanted.

A stack of parchment on the left side of his desk toppled over and slid across his workspace. Lupin glared at the new mess, not yet realising that the quill he'd just been holding had been shoved out of his hand and was now dripping on several letters. It took him a moment to discover his quill was misplaced and when he found it the letters were a mess. He cursed fluently in Old Latin and Evanescoed the blotchy ink spill away.

He was sorely missing life with the Muggles.

Snape was not pleased to see the werewolf by his chair at the staff table as he walked in for breakfast. He resisted the urge to turn and walk right back out. He hated the wizard, but he would not dare show that dislike in public. Firming his perpetual morning scowl, he took his seat at the staff table.

"Good morning, Professor Snape," came the genial voice of Remus Lupin.

Snape grunted a reply as his breakfast popped into existence before him. After several minutes, Lupin spoke up.

"Is it possible that you're staying over the holidays, Professor Snape?" he asked as he began to section his grapefruit.

Snape gave him a glance over his Daily Prophet that had arrived with the morning Owl mail. "Why are you asking, Lupin?" Snape asked flatly.



"Well, Minerva tells me that you assisted during the holidays and summer with the paperwork when she was Deputy. I was hoping..."

Snape interrupted curtly, "This will be Harry's first Christmas with me so I will not be available. You will have to ask someone else." He snapped his paper and went back to hiding behind it.

Lupin sighed with a slight touch of frustration.

The first year Slytherins and Gryffindors filed into the DADA room, found their seats, and then settled curious gazes upon their substitute teacher, the new Deputy and Head of Gryffindor House.

The Gryffindors eyes Lupin critically since they had yet to meet him formally. There were a few whispers that none of the students knew the werewolf could hear with his keen hearing. Most of the comments were uncomplimentary and tended towards criticism of his appearance (he only had Muggle clothing, so he had to purchase teaching robes second hand and they were several years out of date), and speculation as to why he had yet to visit the Gryffindor common room.

On the Slytherin side the students merely watched him, their eyes rather feral and even a bit unnerving for a werewolf to be placed under. As Lupin looked over his students that is when his gaze fell upon Harry, the son of James Potter. He was a bit curious as to why Harry wasn't quite the carbon copy of James in looks as he had suspected. In fact, the boy looked a great deal like Snape and Lupin frowned as he wondered if it was true that Snape truly was the boy's biological father.

Lupin really had never gotten to know Lily Evans, but she had always seemed a decent sort. It had dismayed him, though, when he learned that she had turned her back on her childhood friend, Snape, after he had called her Mudblood in front of the Marauders. His curious nature had him even ask her one night, as everyone was gathered in the Gryffindor common room, why Lily no longer hung around Snape any longer. Those two had been inseparable since arriving as first years and there were many who joked that Lily and Severus were joined at the hips. The red-haired girl had told Lupin in rather scorching words to mind his own business, and so he did.

Putting aside those thoughts, he introduced himself to his students, and then began the lesson which was a review of all they had learned so far. As he had discovered in his first three classes of the day, there had been no practicals, endless readings and lectures, essays, and at least two tests a week. It was a dismal curriculum and apparently there was nothing to be done about it due to the CURSE.

Nearly everyone in the wizarding world knew about the curse on the Defense Against the Dark Arts position. It had been there when Lupin was a student, and since there had yet to be a teacher that lasted more than a year in the position, it was still, firmly, in place.

Lupin had also been able to review some of the past instructors of DADA and they had honestly been witches and wizards whose qualifications, skills in teaching, and dealing with students continued to decline with each year. Quirinus Quirrell did have an impressive resume, but beyond DADA theory, Professor Quirrell had not taught his students anything.

Since the new Deputy Headmaster had no idea for how long he'd be a substitute, he had continued with Quirrell's curriculum, delivering dry, boring lectures that nearly put him to sleep!

When class was over, Lupin had the brief temptation to hold Harry back so he could speak to him, but he chose to abide by Snape's wishes. He hoped that before the end of the term he might be able to visit properly with Harry; even if that meant Snape would be looming over them like the protective bat he was.

"Oh Circe's garters! This is ridiculous!" Minerva walked into Lupin's Deputy office, pushing aside a stack of red enveloped Howlers that were stewing just to the right of the office door. Parchment and envelopes and scrolls hung over shelves and literally appeared to have buried the Deputy Headmaster and his desk. "That old fool hasn't done a lick of paperwork since I was left the position, has he?" The older witch clucked her tongue and demanded as she carefully stepped over some books that had fallen out of their stack and were now strewn across the floor.

"I do believe that Albus just shut the door and ignored it all," sighed Lupin. He dropped his quill into the inkwell, stood up, and then took

out his wand. He cleared a chair for Minerva by levitating several scrolls over to another chair brimming with official looking envelopes.

"Thank you, Remus," Minerva gave the younger wizard a tight smile and then seated herself. "Why did you ask for me?"

"I tried to speak to Severus as you suggested but he made it clear that he would be busy celebrating the holidays with Harry," replied Lupin.

Minerva appeared annoyed at this. "He knows the procedure and he's familiar with all of this." She then glanced over at the stack of Howlers worriedly. "Severus also knows a spell for Howlers that will prevent them from spewing their vitriol."

Lupin sat back down at his desk and slumped into his chair. "I've spoken to the other staff members..." he shook his head. "Hooch was ready to hit me with that broom of hers." He sighed heavily. "Honestly, Minerva, I think I can see why Albus didn't approach anyone else for this job." He smirked tiredly. "They would have drawn and quartered him."

Out of the corner of her eye Minerva saw a stack of parchment on one of the over-filled bookshelves start to slide off. Quickly taking out her wand she cast a Sticking Charm that kept the stack in place. Tucking her wand back into her sleeve she spoke with regret, "I wish that I could help you, Remus, but I am barred from anything that hasn't to do with my teaching. I'm afraid that Severus is your only hope."

Snape was just about to begin his nightly rounds for his day of the week when he was startled by the arrival in his quarters of a wolf patronus. The silvered, ghostly animal stood before his corridor door blocking his way of leaving. He could not help a sneering snarl at the animal.

"Professor Snape, would you see me in my office as soon as your rounds are complete? Thank you. Deputy Headmaster Remus Lupin."

The wolf blinked out of existence as Lupin's message was delivered. With an audible 'harumph' Snape swept out of his quarters, annoyed

that he had no choice but to heed the Deputy Headmaster's official summons.

Sunday, Nov. 3rd, 1991 Very Early

Snape made his way to the Deputy's tower office after his rounds of the castle at one in the morning. For a moment he really didn't expect to find the werewolf still working until he saw the state of the circular office. It looked as though someone had gone into a parchment stationary store and hit the interior with a dozen Blasting Spells. What was worse were that a large group of oobnoxious and very loud Howlers had the werewolf surrounded. Lupin was spinning around amongst them blowing individual Howlers apart with a Shredding Charm.

The Potions Master smirked and leaned in the doorway as he watched two Howlers sneaking up behind the Deputy. Just as he shredded one Howler the two behind him snapped at his backside. He let out a rather feral yelp, spun, and slipped on several scrolls. He was thrown to his back and in frustration he let out a string of curses in Old Latin that rather impressed Snape.

Standing up straight, Snape whipped out his wand and intoned, "Exsisto quietis!" Silence suddenly reigned as every Howler was quietened. With an overly aggrieved sigh he walked over to Lupin and jerked him to his feet. The moment the Deputy was on his feet, Snape walked over to Lupin's desk, kicking a few envelopes out of his way.

"You're attempting to answer correspondence before you have even organised this mess?" Snape inquired scathingly.

"It seemed rather important to do so," Lupin confessed quietly as he settled his robes better about his shoulders after his fall.

Lupin's jaw dropped as Snape and his wand began to ruthlessly deal with the paperwork, the envelopes, scrolls, and the Howlers. In about fifteen minutes the clutter was gone and there were several dozen stacks all over the office.

Snape sheathed his wand and pointed at the largest stack. "All of that goes directly to the Headmaster. Wizengamot correspondence, missives from the Minister, anything from the Board of Governors

that is not also addressed to the Deputy." He turned and pointed to a stack of scrolls. "Ministry official documents that you are to review and sort by what you consider most important." He then turned to the Howlers. "Disgruntled parents. Disarm the Howlers and then send them to Dumbledore."

"I'm afraid I don't know how to disarm a Howler, Sev... I mean, Professor Snape," interjected Lupin.

Snape scowled briefly at Lupin's habit of partially saying his name before correcting himself. "Finite Invetio. It will disarm the Howler so that it will neither explode, nor shout at you. This way you will be able to listen to them to determine whether it is necessary to forward them to the Headmaster or one of the Heads of Houses."

Lupin nodded as he listened, "I take it the Howlers are generally from parents."

"Indeed. When one of their precious little ones are wronged, a parent would rather yell before dealing with the situation like a civilised witch or wizard. Be careful of Molly Weasley's Howlers. She has been known to inject a Slapping Charm into hers." Snape had obviously opened one or two of Molly's Howlers and had been caught by the Slapping Charm as he briefly rubbed his cheek in remembrance.

Lupin, catching the gesture, smiled, but swallowed his laughter. He hadn't expected help from the Potions Master, and since no one else had volunteered to assist in the colossal mess, he dare not do anything to dissuade Snape's... generosity. Of course, the consummate Gryffindor that he was, he did just that.

"I'm very grateful for your help, Severus..." Lupin stopped his apology right there as Snape glowered darkly and a stack of parchment he'd been moving across the room fell to the floor.

Snape brushed past the Deputy and to the door. "I have a test to prepare for my O. classes tomorrow." With that he swept out of Lupin's office, the door slamming shut in his wake.

Lupin sighed but then with a wry smile he began to look over all the other piles that had remained. He was soon able to work a bit more efficiently on the correspondence and by the time he went to bed at

three in the morning, he had forwarded at least a quarter of the paperwork to the Headmaster.

For the next three, very late nights, while Snape still had Night Duty, upon ending his rounds, the Potions Master would end them at the Deputy Headmaster's tower office. Once there he would take either a stack of scrolls or parchments, and further organise them for Lupin to deal with. By the end of the third night, Lupin's bookshelves were cleared, except for books, and the floor was safe to traverse. A charmed filing cabinet of stained pine sorted all incoming correspondence and Lupin had mastered the spell that disarmed Howlers. The Deputy Headmaster learned his lesson and did not further thank the Potions Master, but he did send a small box of coffee flavoured chocolate (non-alcoholic) liqueurs to Snape.

Oddly, Snape did not throw them out, but generously shared them with Harry, Draco, and Hermione.

Thursday, Nov. 7, 1991

Harry waved his wand over the tea cozy he was to turn into a silver teapot. For awhile the tea cozy just kept drooping over on its side. After fifteen minutes it shimmered and changed: it was now a bright, lemon-green plastic teapot. McGonagall drifted by and scowled down at the plastic teapot.

"Concentrate on what you are Transfiguring the tea cozy into, Mr. Snape." She tapped the plastic teapot with her wand and it returned to the drooping tea cozy. "Again."

The professor went over to marvel at Hermione's beautiful silver teapot. All that was wrong with hers was that it was solid silver. McGonagall tapped her teapot and the Slytherin girl was back to her tea cozy.

Harry slumped slightly across his desk. His elbow was perched on the right edge and he dropped his head into his hand as he glared at the stupid tea cozy. He smacked the tea cozy with his wand, crushing it to the desk.

"That won't work," quipped Draco with a light snicker.

"This is dumb!" hissed Harry to his friend.

"No it isn't," replied Draco. "Think how wicked it will be when you can change stuff into whatever you want."

Harry frowned. "I don't want to do that now."

Her tea cozy in hand, Hermione had moved from her desk and sat down by Harry. She whispered, "If you don't get this, Harry, we won't be able to work on the..." she looked about quickly for their professor and found that her back was turned as she fixed Lavender Brown's mess that looked like a prickly, silver, tea cozy. "The project."

"We haven't even started that, Hermione," whispered Draco across Harry. He had been let in on the secret two days ago. At first he'd been upset that he hadn't been told at all, but then he had gotten over it, and was starting to read the book Hermione had found in the library about Animagus Transformations.

"Well, no," she agreed. "I mean, we haven't done the exercises, yet, but we do have to get better in Transfiguration. That means all three of us need to work on our concentration and visualisation."

"Miss Granger, Mr. Malfoy, Mr. Snape!" harrumphed McGonagall. "Five points each from Slytherin for talking in class. Now, get back to work."

The three Slytherins groaned in unison. "Snape's going to kill us!" moaned Draco.

Harry nodded. He wondered if his father might give him a detention for having lost their House fifteen points.

That evening at dinner in the Great Hall Snape glanced between the heavy strands of his hair at Remus Lupin. The wizard had been almost a week in his three jobs and the Potions professor was of the opinion that the werewolf would expire from exhaustion by the end of term. Lupin was nearly falling asleep into his leek soup. An elbow to the man's arm from Hooch had him jerking awake.

"It's ridiculous!" muttered Minerva in a harsh whisper.

Snape turned towards his colleague. "What are you referring to, Minerva?"

"Albus has done the same thing to poor Remus that he did to me when I accepted both the Deputy position, and the Head of Gryffindor House." She tsked and drank a few spoonfuls of her soup.

Snape glanced once more at Lupin who appeared to be trying to listen to Hooch rail on about something to do with professional Quidditch, but his eyes kept fluttering. "I was under the impression that Lupin was rather content with both positions," he commented blandly. "Are you saying he is not?"

Minerva lowered her voice and leaned closer to Snape. "Remus was employed by Lord Quincey Mortimer. As soon as Lord Mortimer heard of my resignation, he petitioned the Board to give the position to Remus." Quickly she glanced daggers over at Dumbledore who was sharing a joke with Filius Flitwick. Her gaze returned to Snape. "Albus did confide to me that no one else applied and that he specifically asked that the Board approve the appointment."

Snape frowned. Now why would Dumbledore have done that? It was clear to him that as far as the Deputy duties, Lupin wouldn't last. As much as it was an administration position, it was also political, and required a certain amount of social grace that Snape didn't believe the werewolf possessed.

"Lupin was foolish to have applied for the Head of Gryffindor position," observed Snape.

Minerva snorted softly as her sneer took on a bite that had always unnerved Snape. The witch had quickly aimed that sneer at Dumbledore, who caught it, and froze like a unicorn caught in fairy lights. As soon as Minerva looked back to Snape, the Headmaster glanced briefly at his Potions professor, before slowly, and cautiously, looking away.

"Tell me, Minerva," Snape cajoled simply.

Minerva replied swiftly, "Remus didn't apply for the job of Head of Gryffindor. No one knew of the Board's decision and Irma Pince was prepared to take over until the position could be circulated and applications could be received."



Snape nodded in suspicious understanding. "There was no empty position to be had when Lupin arrived to take over the Deputy position on the same day you received your notification from the Board."

Now, Snape felt he had some idea of what had angered the werewolf the morning he had nearly collided with the wizard on the Headmaster's spiral staircase. Had Lupin any idea he would be saddled with two jobs?

The Potions Master didn't bother to hide his staring this time as he glared down the table at Lupin. He was not surprised to discover that the man, was now, quite asleep.

Friday, Nov. 8, 1991

"The Cerberus must be guarding something," Hermione declared as she loaded her fork with cubes of fruit.

Draco frowned at the girl, and Harry looked up from his porridge.

Hermione glanced at both boys with exasperation. "Well surely he isn't up there for fun, is he? Something that dangerous has to be there for a reason. So, what could that reason be?"

Harry had never told his friends about the weird story the Headmaster had told him. Especially after his father had heard him being told. He was curious, but was it really his business? Dumbledore seemed to think it was up to Harry to protect it, but why would he want to protect some stupid stone? What if he might get hurt? Or, his friends? He certainly needed no reason to get hurt and getting Draco and Hermione hurt after what had happened at the Ministry, well, he really didn't need to bring them anymore trouble. So, he ignored Hermione's curiosity and worked on finishing his porridge.

Draco was a bit more interested. And, he had a theory, too. He leaned a bit closer to Hermione and whispered, "Maybe its protecting something that someone wants."

Harry wanted to kick Draco when Hermione beamed. She nodded, her bushy curls bobbing round her head. "I think so, too!"

Harry huffed, "So what if it is, Hermione? That doesn't really matter to us, does it?"

Hermione's enthusiasm deflated with Harry's sharp tone. Even so, she still spoke her mind, "Maybe not, but aren't you curious, Harry? Honestly, if the Headmaster didn't want someone to be curious about what's forbidden, why did he even mention it? When I was in Gryffindor, everyone was talking about it. The twins were even thinking of going on an expedition just so they could see what was up there." She tapped the last piece of fruit in her bowl guiltily. "I wonder if I should have told them about the Cerberus." She looked up at her friends. "I mean, what if they get hurt?"

"Who is going to get hurt?" asked Fred.

"Are you little'uns up to something?" asked George with a mischievous smile on his face.

"No," Harry said with a tone of finality.

"We were..." glances from Harry and Draco told Hermione to keep quiet or she was on her own. The two boys really liked the twins, but Slytherins knew, if you had secrets, it was wise to keep them close.

Hermione, who hadn't quite understood that lesson, trusted Fred and George implicitly. Hence, she saw no reason to keep the knowledge she had from them now. "There's a Cerberus in the Forbidden Corridor and I think it's protecting something."

The twins eyes both lit up in anticipation of an adventure and Harry, soon realising that such an adventure would only stir up trouble, broke down, and told them, in a harsh whisper, "Not here!"

Up at the staff table, Snape watched as the Silver Trio left the Great Hall with the two, identical, older Gryffindors. Breakfast had at least another half hour before it was over and he really did not care for his Snakes to leave early. It was better to read, to prepare for the day's classes.

Listening to long old senses, he felt that trouble was afoot. Dabbing his lips with his napkin, he left quietly through the narrow door that led into the staff lounge behind the staff table. From there, he took a

hidden corridor towards the front of the Great Hall. He emerged just as he saw a tuft of red hair vanish into the entrance that led to the dungeons.

Harry led his friends down into the dungeons until they came to an abandoned classroom. Fred and George, who had just mastered Silencing Charms, cast a few over themselves and the Slytherins and then urged Harry to speak.

"Well, you remember when I was in hospital after that fit I had in DADA?" They all nodded. The twins hadn't been there, but after such an incident everyone had heard about it by the end of the day. Harry continued as he told them about the Headmaster's weird visit and the story about the Philosopher's Stone.

"I think it's dumb that Dumbledore brought it here," declared Harry with a cross look upon his face.

Draco nodded, "Who brings something like that into a school with a bunch of kids?"

Fred nodded sagely, but George piped up, "I bet a Death Eater might want it."

"The monster?" asked Harry as he wrapped his arms around himself.

Fred shook his head, "Death Eaters were the elite followers of You-Know-Who. Most of the worst are in Azkaban, but there were some that escaped."

George glanced at Draco and Draco glared at the older boy. "Don't you say it! My papa's a good man!"

Both George and Fred held up their hands in a placating gesture. George apologised, "We know your dad's okay, Draco."

Fred smirked, "No Death Eater in his right mind would put up with a bunch of kids that wanted to play Little League Quidditch."

Everyone laughed and Draco relaxed, smiling just a bit.

George studied Harry and the boy, suddenly conscious of the older boy's gaze, shifted uneasily. "Harry? What happened to you at the Ministry?"

Harry looked up. Well, it was a valid question. Although he didn't really want to talk about it, no one had really told him he couldn't. He just hadn't planned to. Looking at George, though, he thought that since the boy was older than him, maybe he knew something that Harry didn't. And, since Harry did trust the twins, maybe it would be all right to tell them? He glanced quickly at Hermione and Draco and they each nodded almost imperceptibly. Harry began telling the story of their day in the Ministry. Anywhere he had gaps was added to by Draco or Hermione.

"You-Know-Who?" asked Fred.

"The monster," said Harry decisively.

Fred and George gave Harry a curious look. Hermione elaborated, "That's what Harry's calling You-Know-Who."

George's eyebrows rose, "Is that who hurt you and Draco in the Department of Mysteries?"

Draco nodded quickly, "Yeah. He was going to kill us."

"That's impossible," said Fred gently. "Harry killed You-Know-Who when he was a baby."

Harry snarled, "I did not! That's stupid! It was my mum's magic that protected me and this isn't some stupid curse mark that dumb ol' monster left on me!" Harry tapped his scar.

Fred and George stared at him. "But everyone says it's a curse scar," said Fred.

George finished, "Left by You-Know-Who when he cast the Killing Curse in an attempt to kill you."

"Well it's not!" Harry ground out stubbornly.

Fred and George glanced at each other. Hermione spoke up in Harry's defense, "Professor Snape has told me a couple of times

that reading isn't the end of all knowledge and basing your beliefs on a story that was splashed all over the wizarding world by the Daily Prophet and then just repeated everywhere else, including history books, well, that's just ridiculous."

Draco nodded, "My father once told my mother that if the monster had been strong enough to leave a curse mark on a baby, he would have been able to kill that baby. I think Harry's mum's magic makes a whole lot more sense." Draco looked at the scar just as his friend was going to brush his long fringe over it. Hermione stopped the motion. "My father knows a lot about Rune Magic and that's not some lightning bolt like everyone says. That's a rune."

Fred leaned close, whispering under his breath, "Sorry, Harry. Do you mind?"

Harry sucked in his breath as he realised Fred was going to touch the scar. He shook his head. Fred very lightly traced his finger over the scar. At the end of the trace, there was a very tiny spark.

"Ow!" yipped Harry. "What did you do?" He brushed his fringe over the scar protectively as he glowered at the older boy.

George smiled, "It's harmless, Harry. Fred here has an interesting talent."

"George has one, too!" Fred laughed.

"What talent?" asked Draco as his eyes darted between the twins.

George elaborated, "Fred here can feel Light Magic. Me, I can feel Dark Magic."

Draco's eyes sparkled in wonder. "That's wicked!"

"That's creepy!" declared Hermione.

"Wicked creepy!" chorused the twins.

"So what does that mean?" asked Harry as he envisioned the twins going around touching everything in sight.

"Well, we don't just run around touching everything like a couple of goobs," said George.

"We don't really have to," agreed Fred. "It's a sense. Like taste, touch, smell, or sight is."

"Then why did you have to touch my scar?" asked Harry sullenly.

Fred replied, "I just wanted to be sure, Harry. Sometimes touch is the best way." He smiled disarmingly at the three Slytherins. "If that were a curse scar, that tiny spark would have been something worse."

George explained further, "The Dark Magic would have sensed an unknown, possibly harmful presence, and would have thrown Fred back."

"Like a Repulsion Spell," said Hermione nodding in understanding. Fred and George also nodded.

"So, what was that spark?" asked Harry. "That sort of..." he frowned, trying now to recall the sensation. "Okay, well, it didn't hurt, but it did feel sort of tingly. I wasn't expecting it, I guess."

"I think that's just your mum's magic, Harry," said Fred.

Harry smiled warily. "So, it really is good?"

George stepped closer to Harry and held his hand up. "I can make sure, Harry," George said gently.

Harry hesitated then moved aside his long fringe and then closed his eyes. He felt the light touch of George's fingertip as it traced his scar. It tickled a bit, but no more than it did so when he touched it himself. When the touch was gone, he opened his eyes and let out the breath he didn't know he'd been holding. His green eyes sparkled as he grinned at George.

"All is well, Harry," George declared, returning the small boy's relieved smile.

Something tall, and dark, that blended perfectly within the shadows of the classroom also smiled in relief.

"That's really good, Harry," said Hermione, "But doesn't that mean the monster is still going to want the Philosopher's Stone?" She used Harry's word for Voldemort finding that made more sense to say than You-Know-Who.

George leaned back against the wall not realising how close he was to the shadows. "If You-Know... I mean, the monster, is really just a spirit now, and can maybe possess people? Well, who is to say he isn't hitching a ride on someone already in the school?"

"Is that possible?" asked Draco, slightly spooked.

It was Harry who replied firmly, "Yeah. I think he has, too. And, I think he's been killing unicorns and Centaurs."

Of course, the twins didn't know about Harry's visions, or the troubles in the Forbidden Forest. Unfortunately, there wasn't time for that explanation as it was time for class.

"Let's talk after lunch," determined George.

"Stay together," Fred suddenly cautioned the Silver Trio.

They were about to go their separate ways, when Draco grasped Fred's sleeve. "Hey, have you found out, yet, who pranked the sweets bowl on Halloween, yet?"

Fred shook his head and George answered, "We know it's not a Gryff, Draco."

"But we have a good idea who it is," replied Fred. "We need a bit more evidence and then we'll let McGonagall know."

"C'mon! We'll all be late and I know I don't want to be late for Snape's Potions class!" George laughed and they all streamed out of the empty classroom.

Snape slipped from the shadows. He needed to get to his third years Potions class and to find a way to give points to a couple of Gryffindors.

"I think we ought to find it before You-Know... I mean, the monster does," Fred said to the small group of himself, his brother George, and the Silver Trio. They were back in the empty classroom, but they had brought their lunch there to finish.

Draco snorted, "Gryffindors and their adventures!"

George shrugged, conceding that the boy was right. "Maybe, but wouldn't you rather have the Stone than him?"

Harry huffed. "Snape already told me to just forget about it. Why can't Dumbledore take care of it?"

It was Hermione who replied, "Because it was him that told you that you have to protect it."

"Harry," said Fred, "what if the Headmaster is testing you?"

Harry's jaw dropped right before he took a bite of his sandwich. "Why would he do that?"

"You're the Boy-Who-Lived," said George as though that explained it all.

Harry groaned. "That's stupid, stupid, stupid, and dumb. And I really hate that people call me that. I lived because of my mum, not because I had some great powers or whatever."

Hermione, playing devil's advocate, brought up what no one had mentioned, "According to the wizarding world, You... the monster is dead. It doesn't matter if Harry is the Boy-Who-Lived. He's known by everyone as the Baby-That-Killed-You-Know-Who." Harry glared at Hermione. "I'm sorry, Harry, but that's the truth. As far as anyone is concerned, the monster's dead."

Harry poked a finger into the bread of his sandwich somewhat savagely. "I s'pose, but I know he isn't."

"So do I," agreed Draco. "I think my father and Professor Snape know the same thing."

Fred nodded, "So then that means that's what the Headmaster thinks."



Harry shrugged. "So?"

"So," finished George, "Dumbles must have some knowledge that you have the power to get rid of the bad wizard."

Fred added, "Therefore, he's testing you... or rather, he's testing your powers."

Harry pushed his sandwich away angrily. "I don't have any powers! I didn't even know I was a wizard until I got my letter!" He slammed his back against the chair he was sitting in. "I'm not even doing that great in all my classes." He sniffled back an angry tear.

George, who was careful not to take Harry by surprise, sat down by the upset boy and nudged him lightly with his shoulder. He and Fred had learned not to touch Harry unless he invited it. "Listen, little Snake, me and Fred," he looked up at Harry's Slytherin friends, "and Draco and Hermione, aren't going to let you do this by yourself."

Fred seated himself on the other side of Harry, "We just think it would be safer if we found the Stone before the monster can."

Harry sighed, "Wouldn't it be better to figure out who the monster is?"

George nodded, "We could do that, too."

Hermione spoke up, "I already think it's Professor Quirrell." All four boys stared at the girl for an explanation. "Well, Harry had that fit in his class, and then he kept getting those headaches."

"And Quirrell doesn't like Harry," added Draco. "He keeps using Harry as a test subject."

"And the Quidditch game!" exclaimed Hermione. Harry and Draco nodded sagely, but Fred and George did not know what had made Harry lose control. "When Harry's broom went wonky, I saw Professor Snape staring at him, really hard, and his lips were moving. I read that there are some incantations that have to be repeated over and over and if you're casting them on someone, you have to keep your eye on them." She suddenly flushed in embarrassment. Hermione glanced apologetically at Harry. "I know I

should have known better, Harry, but it was a good thing I was suspicious because once I snuck over to the teacher's stand, I could hear Professor Quirrell chanting. And, it wasn't Latin." She shuddered. "It was sort of creepy, and angry, and very old sounding."

Fred nudged George and they both chuckled in sudden understanding. "So that's why you lost us 100 points, Hermione!" crowed Fred.

George was gasping with laughter, "You set Quirrell's robes on fire to stop his chanting!"

Fred asked, "How come you didn't tell anyone?"

Hermione's gaze hardened, "I wasn't going to. Professor McGonagall had already blamed me for everyone in Gryffindor not liking me so I just didn't think she'd listen to me. But then, Professor Snape had me talk to him, and I told him."

"You did?" asked Harry.

"I was sure he'd listen, Harry, and he did." Hermione did not mention that she had also told Snape about the headaches and continuing nightmares.

Draco sort of half sneered, "Yeah, but did he do anything to Quirrell?"

"I... don't think so, but maybe he did and we just don't know it," Hermione suggested.

"Oh," said Draco somewhat mollified. He knew that Professor Snape took care of problems and since he was a Slytherin, it really wasn't something he advertised to the world so it made sense to him.

George spoke up, "Well, you've made a rather good case for Quirrell being You-Know-Who, Hermione." She beamed at the twin.

"Too true," agreed Fred, "but what do we do now?"

"Get the Stone?" asked Draco.

"Maybe," said George, his lips pursed thinly in thought.

"Or maybe we should go see Quirrell," said Fred thoughtfully.

Harry frowned. "Why? He's sick, isn't he?"

George bent toward the smaller first years, "Rumor is that he collapsed on the same day you and Draco were hurt at the Ministry, Harry."

Harry's eyes widened, as did Draco's and Hermione's. Hermione asked softly, "What does that mean?"

"Well," said Fred, "let's look at all we know about Quirrell. He doesn't like Harry. Harry had a really bad fit in his class, and Harry gets headaches that make his scar hurt, right?"

Harry rubbed at his scar as he nodded, "Yeah. You know, that fit I had?" The twins nodded. "Well, Dad thinks it was a vision, sort of. I heard the monster's voice in my head and I think a part of him was kind of living there... no, trapped, I think. But, I wonder if the monster got in Quirrell, too. If maybe the professor let him in." Harry shuddered as he recalled the visions of the unicorns being killed, and the Centaurs. He had remembered them as though there were a second person... enjoying... the murder and he had thought that was him. Maybe it wasn't.

George tapped his lower lip with his index finger. "You said you threw the monster out of your head when you were in the Ministry, Harry?"

Harry nodded. "I had to get rid of him because he was going to hurt... uhm... kill Draco and I was thinking how Draco was my first real friend and I wasn't going to let anyone hurt him..." he paused, not wanting to further embarrass Draco with his mushiness.

"I was really scared, Harry," Draco said softly. "I knew it wasn't you and I kept hoping that you'd come back and help me."

Harry continued as he smiled at Draco, "Dad said I threw the monster out with a Patronus."

Fred and George were awed and suitably impressed. "You cast a Patronus, Harry?" exclaimed Fred.

"A fawn. Dad said it was sitting beside me with its head on my leg," Harry nodded.

"I saw it," said Draco firmly. "It came out of Harry like this huge piece of silvery mist and it was chasing something that just looked... ugh, sick," Draco shuddered at the memory. "I think that's when I blacked out."

George saw that Draco was ashamed for having passed out and not having been brave and he patted the boy's back. "You were really smart, Draco. You didn't run away or try to hex Harry."

Fred smiled, "Rather brave, I think."

"Don't call me a Gryffindor!" snapped Draco, but he smirked, taking the sting out of the rebuke.

George leaned back in his chair. "Well, I think Harry's Patronus must have messed up Quirrell. I think we need to find out if the monster is still in Quirrell or not."

Hermione piped up, "And then we need to tell someone."

"Dad," Harry declared.

"Yeah, Professor Snape," agreed Draco.

"No," said Hermione stopping all conversation. "I think we should talk to Professor Snape, first. Even if Professor Quirrell is sick, it might be too dangerous to go near him." There were solemn nods all around her. It was Fred who saw her studious frown.

"What are you thinking of, Bookworm?" he called her affectionately.

"Well, I guess because I'm Muggle-born I don't understand how ghosts and spirits work, but I have to wonder just how You-Know-Who accomplished this. I mean, his body was destroyed, wasn't it?" Hermione asked.

George nodded, "That's what they say, but we really can't say for certain."

Hermione huffed, "So, his body may be out there, maybe sort of wrecked, and his spirit is running around possessing people?"

Draco sighed, "Seems like it."

Fred spoke uneasily, "Ah, Draco, do you know if your father was there...?"

Draco snapped angrily, standing up, his hands on his hips, "No he wasn't! And neither was Professor Snape! They never wanted to be Death Eaters! It was my grandfather and he was evil, and dark, and as bad as they come and he almost ruined everything! My papa is a good man, so don't you go saying he isn't, Weasel!"

Fred smiled and George raised his hands in surrender. "Hey, cool down, Short Dragon. Forge didn't mean to imply that, did you Forge?"

"No, Short Dragon," Fred smiled again. "I know your papa is a good man and I know he didn't have any choice. He was protecting you, right?"

"And my mother," said Draco with a scowl. His anger was cooling, but slowly.

"So, I think what Forge meant," said George, "was that your father might have been there, even if he didn't want to be."

Draco shrugged and plopped down in his chair.

"Look," said Hermione speaking up, "there are just some things we can't assume. We really need to talk to Professor Snape. And, I'll do some reading up on ghosts and spirits. It might help us to understand better just what this thing is that was in Harry's head, and also, maybe, possessed our teacher."

That evening, instead of studying in their little study room in Snape's office, the twins, Hermione, Draco, and Harry spoke to Snape about their theories, especially about Quirrell. Snape was fascinated by the

talent exhibited by Fred and George. He bared his left forearm to test if the darkness in the Mark could be detected.

For a long moment, the students all stared at the Dark Mark on Snape's inner forearm. It was somewhat faded but the darkened, abused skin was raised everywhere the tattoo was imprinted on the skin. Skull and snake was fearsome enough itself, but Harry gulped worriedly as he watched as the Dark Mark slowly seemed to pulse with a life of its own. Harry's hand reached out and gripped a portion of the man's teaching robes.

"The monster did that to you?" Harry asked in a near strangled whisper.

"The monster did this to all of his followers, Harry," Snape replied flatly. "There were too many that took it willingly."

Fred wisely backed away from the Mark whereas George stepped a bit closer. Snape watched the boy's eyes as George Weasley raised his hand over the Mark. He took in a deep breath and then very lightly touched his fingertips to the Dark Mark.

The boy's eyelids fluttered as his eyes rolled back in his head. His freckled, warm-toned skin flushed and then became ashen coloured. Before Snape could yank his arm away, George pulled his hand back.

"He hurts," George said through clacking teeth.

Snape quickly covered up the Dark Mark and then Summoned a Calming Potion. George drank it and dropped back onto the chair that was nearby. George took a few deep breaths as the potion warmed him from the inside and calmed down his jangling nerves.

Snape moved around his desk, grabbed a chair, and sat down upon it to sit in front of the one-half of the Weasley twins. He leaned forward slightly. "Mr. Weasley, what did you mean by, 'he hurts'?"

George drew in a longer breath that shuddered as it crossed his lips. "Vol... You-Know-Who, Professor. I can feel..." he shook his head. After a minute he raised it. "Through your Dark Mark, it's as though I could feel... him and he's in a lot of pain. He blames..." George

whipped his gaze to Harry and the boy backed up, treading upon Fred's instep. Fred caught the small boy and steadied him.

"He blames my son," Snape repeated carefully. George nodded. Snape saw that the Weasley boy's hands were trembling in his lap. The Potions Master stretched out his hand and placed it over the smaller, fine hands. "What else did you sense, Mr. Weasley?"

"Hate. Not just for Harry, but everything, Professor. It was... it's disgusting." He removed his hands from Snape's, stood up, and paced in a small circle.

Harry shook away from Fred, "Does that mean my Dad is evil?"

George stopped his pacing and looked down at the little Slytherin. "Harry, I..."

Fred interrupted, "No, Harry, he isn't." Snape eyed Fred Weasley skeptically. The third year met his gaze, and smiled. "In my first year I nearly made a really bad mess when I almost tossed a handful of nosegay into Pepper-Up Potion."

Snape frowned and commented wryly, "Yes, that would have easily sent my classroom down about two more floors."

"Well, sir, you grabbed my wrist," Fred chuckled softly. "That's when I knew. You might show us a rather... uhm... not so nice side, but I knew you were okay. You weren't ever going to hurt any of us."

Snape's eyebrows rose fractionally, "This is what a simple touch showed you, Mr. Weasley?"

Fred nodded. "I knew about the Dark Mark because my dad told us all about the trials, but both he and mum have told us that you're a good man." He shrugged affably. "After you grabbed my wrist, I knew for sure that they were right."

Harry smiled his relief. He knew the Dark Man was good, but it did help that others knew he was good, too.

"Sir, what do we do about You-Know-Who?" asked Hermione.

"You are children. You will do nothing about You-Know-Who," Snape replied firmly.

"But he wants the Stone!" exclaimed Draco. "And if he gets it, then he'll go after Harry and..."

Harry added, "We gotta do something, Dad!"

Snape towered over them all. "No. You do not. I mean it. This is a situation for adults and we will take care of it. If you learn something else," he glanced pointedly at Harry who had obviously not told his friends about his nightmares, "then I expect you to come to me and tell me about it. Is that understood?" His gaze swept over them all. One by one they nodded, and quietly said, 'yes, sir.'

Snape ushered everyone out, except for Harry who paused in the doorway.

"Dad?"

The Potions Master looked down at his favourite Snake. "Yes, Harry?"

"The Stone. The Headmaster told me I was supposed to protect it." He glanced worriedly up at his father. "They all think it's a test."

Snape placed a hand on his son's shoulder. "Harry, you listen to me, and ignore the Headmaster. I do not believe he has your best interests at heart." He then knelt down and placed his hands around his son's upper arms. "I will never test you, or judge you. You are my son and no one can say or do otherwise."

Harry grinned and quickly hugged his father. He whispered into his ear, "I love you, too, Dad."

As Harry ran after his friends and towards the Slytherin common room, he rose and straightened. A very brief, and satisfied smile touched his lips.

Just before curfew, Hermione slipped out of the Slytherin common room and made her way to the library. She really needed to do some research on ghosts and spirits.



A/N: I am so very sorry this took so long to get posted. The heat here got a bit suffocating, despite my fan, and I think it triggered several migraines. I so wish I had Snape's Migraine Relief Potion! Anyway, I have it written and part of the next chapter is written, so I hope it won't take more than two weeks to complete it.

Do let me know how you liked this chapter. It was a hard one to write since I haven't written Remus Lupin much. I hope you liked him.

I am having a sort of contest for the 1,000 reviewer. Whoever leaves the 1,000th review will have a short story written just for them. It will star, of course, our favourite Potions Master, and anyone else you wish. The subject matter will be my choice with the exception of slash or graphic sex. I just can't write those convincingly.

Friday, Nov. 8, 1991

Hermione Granger had learned that once you were in Slytherin House and it was after curfew there was no way to leave without Professor Snape knowing about it. He had wards all over the entire House that helped him to keep an eye upon his Snakes. Since she needed, or wanted, to do research on ghosts and spirits, Hermione was determined to devote her entire weekend to the research.

That really wasn't the real reason for her slipping out just before curfew and before the wards were activated. Hermione hadn't told anyone, but she was certain that the Restricted Section would have a much more pertinent tome for her study. At least, that's what she hoped and since no one in the first through third year was even allowed to ask for a pass to the Restricted Section, Hermione felt she had no other choice than to disobey the rules. And, she hoped... dearly hoped, that the wards around Slytherin House wouldn't know she was gone.

Hermione slipped easily into the library and she was glad of her dark robes and that she wasn't full grown, yet. Staying to the shadows the bushy-haired Slytherin girl made her way through the stacks to the very back of the library.

The Restricted Section took up the entire wall at the back of the library. All the books, scrolls, and old parchments were behind shelves that were screened by copper. There were many parts of the copper screening that had tarnished and had gone slightly green with age. As Hermione looked over the shelves she had to wonder why wards weren't put up to keep the students, like herself, from getting into the restricted material. Upon reaching for one likely book, she learned why wards were unnecessary.

Upon touching the heavy tome, Hermione felt a terrible spark arc out and sting her fingers. Simply reacting she dropped the lamp she was carrying that held one of her blue flames within it. The glass shattered, everywhere, and the little magical flame snuffed out. The lamp remains first hit a corner of the shelf, and then Hermione's foot and she let out a squeal.

"Who's there?" demanded a gruff voice.

"Merlin help me!" gasped Hermione under her breath. "It's Filch."

An ominous yowl sent Hermione running from the Restricted Section and darting through the stacks. A few times the shadows were so dark she clipped her hip upon a shelf or a desk. Even so, to her thankful graces, the door of the library wasn't all that far away and she was soon through it. Unfortunately, Mrs. Norris was right behind her which meant that Filch wasn't too far away.

Hermione quickened her run into a sprint, dashed up a nearby staircase, and found herself in a long corridor that had a slow, upward slope. A meow from Mrs. Norris only informed her that she was hardly home safe. With a stitch in her side, she increased her speed until she came out of the corridor.

Up ahead an ornate door slowly opened and without thinking about it, Hermione went through the door, and it slipped shut behind her.

Hermione's feet stopped abruptly right before she ran into... her parents.

Her mother smiled sweetly at her, proudly even, and Hermione let out a small gasp. Her father stood next to her mother and the pipe he always had in his mouth was gone as he smiled, too. The absolute pride and approval in their eyes was horribly painful. It was something she'd never seen before, yet she had always wanted.

Hermione rapidly shook her head. "No. You're not real." She scowled sharply. "I know you don't want me. Not anymore. I know it." She turned away from the mirror just as the Grangers shifted and changed. Unable to resist a perverse need to turn back Hermione spun round.

The little girl watched as her father put a pipe into his mouth and then reclined with his paper onto a worn out, dark green upholstered chair and a matching ottoman.

"Da?" Hermione said softly as her fingertips trailed down the hard glass. She watched in dismay as her father snapped open his paper obscuring his face. Hermione then looked up at her mother. "Mum?" She hated the hopeful feeling that welled in the smile that wavered upon her face as she looked up into the eyes of the now severe looking woman before her.

With a terribly disappointed glance, the woman turned away from her daughter.

"Mum! Mum! Please come back!" Hermione's fist banged angrily against the glass but her mother kept walking past her father and up the stairs to her bedroom. Hermione laid her cheek against the cold, unforgiving surface as she imagined her mother stepping into her overly large room where she had three closets crammed full of dresses she never wore. On her dresser were eight jewelry boxes made of stained pine that held some of the most magnificent jewels the little girl had ever seen. Her mother had always slapped her hand away from the jewels. She had never been allowed to try anything on.

Suddenly Hermione jerked backwards as the living room she had grown up in faded to be replaced by the somewhat faded view of another library. A wonderful library where she had access to all the books in the world. She watched as Narcissa walked through the smokey, faded view, and into the library. The beautiful woman, who wore a simple, yet very lovely gown of pale peach that set off the silken waterfall of gold that was her unbound hair, glided over to Lucius who was seated at an ornate desk. He turned slightly in the mahogany chair and accepted a parchment from his wife. Lucius held it up so Hermione could read that the parchment was her O.W.L.s and they were all Os! Lucius smiled proudly at her. Narcissa turned and also graced Hermione with her approval.

Hermione then marveled as a figure of herself leapt into view and threw her arms around Narcissa. Narcissa embraced her fully, in a manner her own mother never had. Lucius rose from his desk, handed the image of Hermione her test results and he bestowed upon her forehead a kiss. When Hermione's image went to embrace Lucius, he didn't push her away, but drew her into his arms.

The real Hermione never knew she had slid down to the floor, sitting upon the cold stone, as she watched the two scenes continually play out. Hermione had no idea that her magic, her wish, had changed the inherent magic of the mirror. It fed upon her like a silent vampire as she remained trapped. Beneath her the cold seeped into her skin, spreading. The little girl never realised that she was starting to freeze.

Snape's Slytherin House wards were more complete than any of his students realised. They soon learned, though, that not only was it impossible to leave after curfew, but he would know at once if one of his Snakes wasn't within the House at curfew. Most of the older students knew this for it was more often than not the first years, and sometimes the second years, who tried to stay out after curfew and sneak back in later.

Consequently, when nine in the evening chimed throughout the castle, Snape knew at once that one of his Snakes had not made it home on time.

Snape had been grading some last minute quizzes for his fifth years when he felt the internal 'chime' of his wards around Slytherin House that let him know someone was missing. Putting away his quill, the ink, and then the quizzes, he Summoned his teaching robes, draped them over his shoulders, and left his office to go to the common room.

He soon had everyone assembled and as he counted the heads of his Snakes, he had his prefects do so as well. A quick comparison of numbers showed that one Snake was missing. Of course, during his counting he was absolutely certain who was gone.

"Does anyone know where Miss Granger is?" he asked all of his Snakes. He glanced towards Harry and Draco who were usually not to be found with their friend.

Draco shrugged, but it was Harry who spoke up, "I saw her go up to her dorm just as me and Draco did, sir."

Snape's gaze then shifted to Hermione's dorm mate, Millicent. "Miss Bulstrode? Did you see Miss Granger go to bed?"

She shook her head, then nodded. Snape's concerned frown deepened into a scowl. Millicent quickly explained, "I did see Hermione, sir, but then she said she forgot one of her textbooks in the common room. I was reading and I never really noticed that she hadn't come back."

Snape drew in a steady breath. "Everyone is to go to bed, now," he ordered sternly. He started to leave and step through the portrait

hole when someone tapped his arm. He glanced over his shoulder to see his son.

"Could I help look for Hermione, Da... uhm, sir?" he asked quietly.

"No, you may not, Mr. Snape," he replied a bit too curtly. "I am the Head of Slytherin House and Miss Granger is my responsibility, not yours."

"But Hermione's my friend," Harry said stubbornly.

"Go to bed, Mr. Snape. This instant!" Snape pushed his way through the portrait door. He was too angered by Hermione's disappearance to see the angry scowl his son sent to his vanishing back.

After an hour of searching fruitlessly for his missing Snake, Snape had gone to the Headmaster for help.

"I've done a Point-Me Spell, Headmaster, and there was nothing!" Snape glared at his wand held loosely in his hand. "I checked the library. Miss Granger might have been in there. Filch found a broken lamp in the Restricted Section."

Dumbledore scratched his beard. "I wonder what she could have been doing in there?"

"Miss Granger was worried about my son and Mr. Malfoy and what had happened in the Ministry. I believe she might have been doing further research on possession," Snape explained, only smudging the truth. After seeing the broken lamp he had concluded that after the talk the children had with him that evening that Hermione had decided to research more about ghosts and spirits. She had said then that she wanted to know just how Voldemort was sustaining his existence.

Unfortunately that knowledge did very little in helping him to find the girl. It was also frustrating and worrisome that his Point-Me Spell, usually quite infallible, had given him nothing.

"Headmaster?"

Snape looked up from his ruminations to see Remus Lupin. Before he could effect a good sneer at the man's appearance, he saw Pomona Sprout and Filius Flitwick follow the werewolf into the office.

"I am terribly sorry for waking everyone," apologised Dumbledore, "but we have a missing student and we need your assistance in finding her."

"Who is it?" asked Pomona with a look of motherly worry on her face.

Snape spoke up, "Miss Granger. According to her friends she seems to have left the Slytherin common room at around 8:30 tonight. Mr. Filch found a broken lantern in the library."

"Oh my!" gasped Flitwick. "She hasn't been abducted, has she?"

"We hope not, Filius," said Dumbledore quietly, yet the expression on his face showed that he was already concerned about such a possibility. "I would like for all of us to search the castle for one hour. If the child is not discovered in that time, I shall call the Aurors and report that she is missing."

"A simple Point-Me Spell should take care of that," said Lupin with a suppressed yawn.

Snape did sneer then. "Do you think I have not already tried that already, Lupin?"

"Severus, please," the Headmaster cautioned gently. "I tried several location spells as well. Please, do your best and send a Patronus message if you should find Miss Granger."

Dumbledore ushered the Heads of Hogwarts Houses out of his office. At the bottom of the stairs, they parted to various areas of the castle.

Remus Lupin hesitated briefly at the bottom of the stairs beside the gargoyle. Snape was already heading back towards the dungeons when he made his decision.

"Professor Snape! Wait, if you would?" he called out.

Snape paused in place and turned slowly to face Lupin. He glared, but it was a half-hearted one. He was far too worried about Hermione.

Lupin stopped in front of Snape and quickly ran his fingers through his hair. Before the Slytherin could say anything snarkish, Lupin declared, "I may have a way to find Miss Granger."

"Well?" asked Snape when it seemed no explanation was forthcoming.

"In my office," Lupin finally said. He motioned for the Potions professor to follow him and they made their way quickly to Lupin's Deputy office. Once through the doors, he sealed them and put up a Silencing Spell.

The office was much neater and no longer cluttered with the paperwork that Snape had first found the Gryffindor nearly buried in. A bit of decorating had been done as well; bookshelves, odd knick-knacks, and not a single moving portrait in sight. Not even the landscape that pictured some quaint old farmland was an enchanted one.

"No portraits, Lupin?" Snape asked flatly, the inflection not showing his curiosity.

"Portraits can be notorious gossips, Professor Snape." He levitated the landscape up nearly a foot to reveal the bare, grey stone beneath. "I've never much cared for them."

Snape nodded absently. He felt rather the same way about portraits. A wizard couldn't always trust the word of a magical, talking portrait. He had always disliked the notion that portraits of all the past Heads of Hogwarts adorned the Headmaster's office. Supposedly acting as advisers. No one ever seemed to take into account that a few of those Heads had been as notoriously corrupt as any political official could manage to be.

"What are you doing, Lupin?" Snape asked he saw the werewolf tapping certain stones in an odd sort of rhythm.



Lupin glanced over his shoulder. "I'm trusting you, Severus, with another one of my secrets. Now, quiet." Lupin, interrupted by whatever he had been doing, had to start over.

Snape wondered what other sort of secret Lupin might have considering his greatest one was his most damning. A grating noise kept his thoughts from wondering any further when the stones moved aside to reveal a hidden cabinet with a very Muggle combination lock on it. Lupin deftly spun the dial left, then right, left again, and right one last time. The ancient looking cabinet sprung open and he removed a large piece of parchment folded over several times.

The Potions Master would not admit he was intrigued as he wondered what the bit of parchment might be that it needed to be hidden away by both magical and Muggle means. He moved over to Lupin's desk as the man spread the parchment out; unfolding it, smoothing over the heavy creases.

It was blank. Snape almost, stupidly, stated the obvious. Lupin, seeming to know what was going through the Slytherin's mind, looked his way and smiled rather smugly.

"What is this, Lupin? I have a child to find and so far I can only see that we're wasting time!"

"Oh ye of little patience," Lupin mis-quoted deliberately. He then tapped his wand to the parchment and spoke softly, "I am up to no good."

To Snape's astonishment, black ink bloomed at the center of the parchment and then spread out like defining branches in angles, circles, and curves. It was soon easy to see that the ink was mapping out the foundation and each floor of Hogwarts castle. Each floor and room was labeled in a fine, and precise hand. The striking peculiarity of the map didn't end there, though. Once every portion of the castle was drawn small dots began to appear. Most of the dots clustered in the various dorms of the Houses. They were labeled by the name of each dot and were so crowded that they overlapped each other.

"Wherever did you get this, Lupin?" Snape breathed in wonder as he watched the dot labeled Albus Dumbledore pace back and forth in his office.

"A rather keen bit of magic that James, Sirius, Peter, and I managed around our fifth year," replied Lupin, his voice a bit wistful.

Snape looked away from the map. "None of you could have done this."

Lupin frowned at the tone of jealousy that Snape had not hidden in his voice. "You aren't the only one who can read a book, Severus," he chided.

"Yet you have no idea how to deal with a Howler," Snape bit back.

Lupin rolled his eyes at Snape. "And I suppose it was something you knew how to do the first time you encountered several at a time?"

Snape's lips thinned. Actually, he hadn't. In his first year he had been rather humiliatingly burned by seven Howlers from irate parents complaining to him about their precious witch or wizard's grades. From then on he decided he had to find a way to disarm the vicious little letters so he at least could read them.

Irritably, Snape tapped his finger upon the map. "Shall we see if we can find Miss Granger, Lupin?"

Lupin nodded and studied the map and the dots as did Snape. He finally spotted the girl's dot up on the seventh floor in a room labeled – Mirror Chamber.

"She isn't moving," stated Snape.

"Let's get to her quickly then," said Lupin as he folded the map and tucked it into his robes. "She might be hurt."

The two wizards quickly left the office and made their way as swiftly as possible to the seventh floor. Not long after arriving they came across the same, welcoming door that had opened so smoothly for Hermione. They entered cautiously, wands drawn.

"Miss Granger!" Snape saw the girl seated upon the bare floor in front of some sort of mirror. Her body was visibly shivering. He started to go towards her, but Lupin grasped his arm preventing him from doing so.

"She's mesmerised, Severus, by that mirror," he whispered as he stared warily at the thing that was pulsing grotesquely. "I think it may be unwise for us to get too close."

They studied the mirror from their positions as both of them kept their gazes from the reflective surface. Snape then pointed at an odd inscription over the top of the mirror, "Erised stra ehru oyt ube cafru oyt on wohsi. That makes no sense," he glowered. "That is no language I have ever heard of."

Lupin smiled, "That's because it's backwards, Sev..."

Snape shot a glare at the werewolf. Lupin glared right back. He was tired of having to address the wizard that was his colleague so formally. "Considering the fact that I am technically your superior, and because it annoys the hell out of you, I'm going to call you by your name, Severus. So deal with it." He then pointed sharply at the inscription and translated, "I show not your face but your heart's desire."

The Potions Master felt a tiny smirk begin to appear over his lips at the indignant backbone from the Deputy Headmaster. He couldn't show it, though so he returned his attention to the mirror. "I think this is the Mirror of Erised," said Snape.

"I thought that was a myth," Lupin interjected quietly.

Snape did sneer. "Obviously not. How are we going to get her away from that thing?"

Lupin frowned at the pulsing it was doing. He waved his wand, incanting a rather complicated spell. As Snape did his best to translate the Old Latin in his mind, he was just able to figure out that the werewolf was performing a sort of Diagnostic Spell that checked for an active curse. Once finished, Lupin cursed, again in Old Latin.

"I don't know how it's doing so, Severus, but that... thing... is feeding on Miss Granger's magic."

Lupin whipped his wand down sharply, and conjured something from the air. A deep red cloth fell over the mirror obscuring its reflective surface and breaking the spell it had over Hermione.

Snape gave the smug looking wizard beside him one of his really annoyed scowls. "A drape, Lupin?"

The Deputy shrugged with a slight upturn to his lips, "It worked, didn't it?"

"M-m-mother?" Hermione tried to rise, to remove the offending cloth, but she was cold and stiff.

Snape moved away from Lupin, removed his outer teaching robes, and threw them over the chilled girl. "Miss Granger?" Her eyes were still upon the mirror even though she could no longer see what images had been in it. He lightly grasped her chin, forcing her to look into his eyes. "Miss Granger, can you hear me?" Her lips were blue, as were the ends of her fingers. Her skin was as pale and as cold as porcelain.

Hermione's eyes blinked slowly as she came back to reality. "Mum left me," she murmured sadly. "Da... well, he's da, isn't he? Do you think he knows he has a daughter? I don't think so. Aunt Narcissa says my parents haven't even written back to them. I wrote..." her voice was beginning to speed up, "and they never answered me! I don't think they want me anymore!"

"Miss Granger," Snape said softly. He was rather mystified by what the child was babbling on about. "I do not..."

"So disappointed," Hermione sighed mournfully. "I'm never going to be what mummy wants." She laid her cheek against her teacher's shoulder.

Snape lifted the girl into his arms as she sagged heavily, passing out. Rising, he pushed past Lupin and made his way to the Infirmary.

Neither noticed that one of her hands was gripped tightly about something.

Madame Pomfrey had finished her examination of Hermione and spelled several potions into her. When the girl was suitably tucked in, she went over to the two wizards that had been waiting for a diagnosis.

"Miss Granger's magical core is fine although exhausted. As though it put up some sort of fight. She is also suffering from Hypothermia. I have given her a Magic Strengtheners, and a Tissue Regenerator, since she had some damage on her fingers and anywhere her open skin touched the cold surface. Lastly, I gave her a Nutrition Potion which will aid the other potions in working quickly." The medi-witch clucked her tongue. "Where did you find her?"

Lupin's answered before Snape, "Seventh floor, an abandoned room. It was like ice in there."

"Miss Granger was on the floor," added Snape.

Poppy nodded, "Well, she just needs a good night of sleep, now. And, you two need to leave." She shooed the two men out of the Infirmary and then lowered the lights before heading to her own quarters.

Outside of the Infirmary in the corridor, Snape was taking Lupin to task about the mirror. "That mirror is a Dark Artefact and shouldn't be anyplace where children can get to it!"

"I'm not the one who put it there!" snapped Lupin. "I will see about getting it moved, though. What do you think she was even doing up there?"

"I am guessing that someone, probably Filch, caught her in the library and chased after her," replied Snape as though the other man should have known.

"Filch?" blanched Lupin. "Don't tell me he's still here?" Snape stared in astonishment at Lupin. "Is he? He terrified me when I was a student. Scary old bugger."

Snape shook his head lightly. "What is with you, Lupin? You don't know about Filch, you haven't even talked to your House, yet... or have you?" A sheepish look from the wizard caused Snape to snort

with derision. "Are you even qualified to be here?" shouted Snape suddenly.

"I didn't want to work here, Severus!" Lupin shouted right back. "It's all Albus' fault!"

Snape had something else to say, but he had been shocked by that response and it momentarily stunned him. Lupin's expression remained angry, frustrated, frozen upon his face.

Finally Snape spoke, but it was slow, careful. "What is Albus' fault? Didn't you want the jobs?"

Lupin's golden eyes narrowed, the pupils widened, and it took every muscle Snape had to not back away. Somehow, without even knowing what he was thinking, he had roused the wolf in the man before him.

"I had a good job, Severus. I was tutoring and caring for the four children of Quincey and Anne Mortimer. Do you know who he is?" demanded Lupin. He didn't wait for Snape to answer. "He's a Squib. Quincey is the liaison between the Muggle and wizarding worlds. Two of his children are Squibs and two will wind up here." He drew in a deep breath and Snape noticed that the light in the man's eyes faded. The wolf was being pulled back. "I taught and lived with them for ten years, Severus. Anne bought my Wolfsbane for me and once a month I slept on their library hearth. Their children knew what I was, and none of them were afraid of me." He snarled, then, "It was a damn good job so why the bloody hell do you think I'd even want to work here? Especially with you here!"

Snape didn't know what to think so he just turned away and walked towards one of the dungeon entrances. He had gotten quite a length away when he turned and strode back. "Did you not want to finish what Potter and Black started?" he hissed.

Lupin reared back. "Are you insane?" He glared. "Forget I asked that. Of course you are, you black beetle. I told you already that I stopped hanging around them. Did you never notice? There were two people, you imbecile, who nearly lost their lives that night: you and I!"

Snape frowned, doubly hard as he thought back to his last two years. He really hadn't paid all that much attention to the Marauders and

their dynamics. All he knew was that Lily had become a part of them. But, as his mind skimmed over those foggy memories, he did recall. He remembered one evening at dinner in the Great Hall. Just a fleeting glance towards, not the Marauders, but Lupin himself at the end of the Gryffindor table. It had registered then, just for a moment, that Lupin had been by himself since that night.

Hermione woke blearily to the voices that seemed to be arguing somewhere in the corridor. As she raised a hand to rub at her eyes, she was aware of her tightly rounded fist. Opening her fist and wincing at the pain in her stiff fingers, she looked down upon a rather unassuming stone of pale pink and mottled by what appeared to be flecks or flaws of other types of stone. Almost like granite, but, despite its irregular shape, it was smooth and felt like silk.

Hermione remembered that the stone seemed to have fallen from the Mirror just before she felt an overwhelming sadness engulf her heart.

Slipping from the Infirmary bed, she found her school robes folded neatly on a shelf in the bedside table. Her wand was upon the small table's surface. Grabbing her robes, she slipped the stone into a pocket then refolded the robes. Yawning and shivering slightly, Hermione promptly climbed back into bed, forgetting the stone. She was very soon asleep.

Across the Infirmary, in a corner behind a privacy screen, Professor Quirrell moaned painfully yet did not wake from his coma.

Suddenly, Snape grabbed Lupin by the collar and yanked him into movement. It was so quick that the Deputy Headmaster didn't even think to protest. He just trotted after the Potions Master down through the dungeons until they went through a hidden door and he was thrust onto a sofa.

"Explain yourself, Lupin!" demanded Snape as he loomed over the other man who was busy fixing his wrinkled collar.

"Explain what?" Lupin grumbled.

"Just what are you doing here if you had such a perfect job?" huffed Snape.

Lupin blinked in puzzlement. "You know," he replied a bit stupidly. "Everyone does. Albus told me..."

Snape's eyes rolled as he dropped into his chair. "Dumbledore strikes again." He glared accusingly at the other wizard. "He told me nothing, Lupin. Minerva has told me that you were the only applicant for the Deputy job, but she and I both know that the Head of Gryffindor House had to be as much of a surprise to you as it was to us. She was removed from the position the day you arrived!"

Lupin frowned in puzzlement. "No. No that's not right." He glanced up as he leaned forward and laced his fingers together worriedly. "Severus, I swear to you, I had no idea about either job until Quincey came to me and told me about the Deputy's position. He didn't want to let me go and I certainly didn't want to leave a home where I felt so accepted. I also didn't want to come here to Hogwarts with you here..."

Snape's eyes narrowed. "Why not?"

"I know you're not that obtuse, man. Sirius set us both up that night and it's something I've never forgiven him for. No one ever said anything, but the way you looked at me that day forward was enough for me to stay far away. You're frightened of me..." Snape's lip curled in warning, and denial. Lupin's voice hardened, "I know the look of fear and revulsion, Severus. You've been frightened of me since that night and I do not blame you one bit. Albus told me that you still harbored some dislike of me, but he said, and I quote, 'Severus has quite forgiven you for that night, my boy. Would there have been any other reason for him to have eased your suffering with the invention of the Wolfsbane?'" Lupin stilled his nervous fingers. "You still fear and revile what I am, Severus. I can see it clearly and I would not stay here and make your life... situation miserable."

Snape was quiet for several minutes as he laid his head back and closed his eyes. He then spoke, biting out the words, at first, "I do not revile you, Lupin. Nor do I fear you. However, I do worry about the students here because I could find no evidence that showed you were doing anything about your... furry little problem once a month."

"Anne bought the Wolfsbane for me from an apothecary in France, Severus," he sighed heavily. "Antoine D'Lisle. I didn't want anyone



here to know where I was on the off-chance that it might endanger the Mortimers."

"And D'Lisle's customer list is sacrosanct," whispered Snape.

For a long moment, both men were quiet and then Lupin spoke up, "Your worry for the children is understandable, Severus, but you do still resent me." Snape glared tiredly at him. Lupin shook his head. "My actions, when I was following James and Sirius around, are inexcusable, Severus. I may not have been the one to hex you, but I know I could have grown a backbone and done something to help you."

"Yet you did not," Snape bit out. "Too afraid of Potter, were you?"

Lupin nodded. "You don't know how many in Gryffindor were, Severus. Me, most of all, I think. I was terrified of anyone discovering my secret and I was..." he lowered his head and Snape just watched him. "James and Sirius really would have never known, but Albus told them."

Snape shot up straight in his chair. "He what?"

Lupin smiled wearily. "They were my dorm mates and the Headmaster was certain they would understand and that it would be good for all of us."

"That's madness!" gasped Snape. "What if either Potter or Black decided to turn you in?"

"It was Peter I was more worried about," Lupin chuckled ineffectually. "He put up a royal fuss. If Albus hadn't promised to teach them how to become Animagi..." he stopped as he saw the further outraged expression on his colleague's face. "Sorry. I probably shouldn't have mentioned that." He shrugged in resignation. "James and Sirius were willing to accept me after that. Peter was a little more reluctant, but eventually he learned the discipline. He was bitterly disappointed when he learned what he was."

Snape rose to his feet and paced angrily. "Animagi! They were Animagi? And Dumbledore taught them." He glared towards Lupin, but the Deputy was able to tell that the glare wasn't meant for him. "As a bribe?"

Lupin nodded. His head was beginning to ache and he massaged his temples. Rummaging in his pocket, he took out a bar of Honeydukes chocolate and broke off a piece. As he ate his, he offered the chocolate to Snape.

"No. Thank you." To Lupin's surprise, the Potions Master suddenly vanished through a shadowed doorway.

Lupin waited patiently wondering if he'd allowed his mouth to run off too much. It was obvious, though, that Albus had mislead him and had not spoken to Snape. He lowered his head into his hands. He didn't mind confessing to Snape, but after a few hours the wizard would return to distrusting him. The sarcasm would be back, as would be the hateful insults and Lupin would be worried the entire time that Snape would break his silence and tell all.

"Veritaserum!" Snape's sudden arrival startled Lupin.

"What?" asked Lupin as he glanced at the small phial in the Potions Master's hand.

"Veritaserum. I need to hear everything you've told me under the Veritaserum," Snape exclaimed.

"You don't trust my word," Lupin declared flatly.

Snape glowered at him. "I am suspect. It's too much. Dumbledore lying? You not forgiving the Marauders? Animagi? Is it not a fantastic tale even to you?"

Lupin, "I must admit, Severus, it would give me pause."

Snape advanced upon him. "I do this for my son, Lupin."

"Harry?" whispered the other man.

"You are a werewolf. This means you are a danger to him, and to his friends," Snape spoke firmly. "If you wish me to have any sort of trust in you, then I must be certain of what you have told me." Lupin eyed the phial. After a minute, Snape spoke dryly, "I will not force this on you, Lupin. It is your choice."

Lupin's eyes rolled slightly at the unspoken threat. "I have already been threatened with exposure for not staying, Severus." He watched Snape's eyebrow rise in question. "Albus, of course." The reluctant Deputy Headmaster glowered. "I have been royally played." He took the phial from the Potions Master. "Of my own free will, Severus. For you and for Harry." Lupin tipped his head back, tapped three drops of the clear potion onto his tongue, and handed the phial back to Snape.

Snape watched the other wizard carefully as a haze came over his amber eyes. A silly smile then graced his face.

"Hi, Severus!"

Harry was getting very tired of pacing in the Slytherin common room. It had been hours and hours and hours since his father had gone off after Hermione and Draco had fallen asleep in front of the fire.

His pacing took him in front of the fire, and in a fair imitation of Snape, he stood, arms crossed, glaring into the flames.

"Hours and hours," he ground out. Harry made his decision, then. He strode to the portrait that led into the Slytherin common room and was startled when it remained in place.

"Hey! Let me out!" he demanded of Salazar Slytherin's painted visage.

"My apologies, little Snake, but the Head has decreed that no one is to even attempt a sojourn beyond my portrait," Salazar bowed superciliously.

"Sojourn?" asked Harry. He let out a small snarl. "That's it. I'm sending away for that stupid dictionary!" Harry stomped back up the stairs to his dorm to prepare an owl order since he was unable to seek out his father.

Down in the common room, Draco stirred from his sleep and yawned and stretched. "Is it time for breakfast, yet?"

"Go to bed, young Snake," order Salazar.

Draco yawned again, slid off the sofa, and blearily made his way up to his dorm.

Lupin was on his knees, his head hanging over a bucket on Snape's sitting room floor. A cool cloth was draped over the back of his neck and Snape emerged from the hidden entrance to his private lab. He held a slim phial with a lavender liquid within it.

"Anti-Nausea Potion. It is a special formulation for just such a reaction to Veritaserum," explained Snape curtly. He glowered as Lupin drank down the phial. The wizard grimaced at the chalky taste. "You should have told me you were allergic to Veritaserum."

Snape returned to his chair and sneered in disgust at the odour from the bucket. It helped when Lupin vanished the bucket and its contents.

Lupin lifted himself back onto the sofa. "I felt it was important that you believed me, Severus." His stomach was feeling better, but as it had done once before, the remainder of the Veritaserum made him feel exhausted. "I think there's some left, so if you want to ask something else, go ahead."

Snape nodded and steepled his fingers, resting the fingertips against his chin. "The morning I met you coming out of the Headmaster's office. You appeared rather angry. Why?"

Lupin closed his eyes as his voice recited somewhat mechanically, "I was angry when I went to see him. Halloween was such a farce with him introducing me as the new Deputy AND the Head of Gryffindor. I refused the position and told him I wasn't about to be his 'Gryffindor Boy' and if that was the reason he brought me here, I would just as soon quit and return to the Muggle world."

Snape eyed Lupin shrewdly. "You were never part of the Order of the Phoenix, were you?"

Lupin shook his head slowly and regretted even that motion. "When I turned eighteen I was approached by Albus and told that my 'place in the conflict with Voldemort' was assured." He smirked at Snape's widening eyes. "Yes, my reaction as well. In that moment I discovered why the Headmaster had kept my secret so well. He

wanted the werewolves on the side of the Light and he expected me to be his spy amongst them."

"Why weren't you?" Snape did not like the fact that it appeared as though Lupin had been groomed to be a spy just as Snape eventually was.

Lupin raised his arms, "What was there for me, Severus? An werewolf educated as a wizard. I couldn't risk applying for any wizarding jobs because someone would soon discover what I was and you know that werewolves are not allowed to gain employment, get married, or have children."

Snape nodded, "Persona non grata."

"Very," scowled Lupin. "That and I lost my parents to that Italian Portkey accident when I was fifteen. Forever vanished with ten other witches and wizards. There was nothing here for me so I escaped to the Muggle world."

"How did you get the job with Mortimer?" inquired Snape.

"Minerva McGonagall," supplied Lupin. "She has a squib cousin, Edward McGillicutty, who worked in the Prime Minister's office. Edward told her about the Mortimers and Minerva told me that they needed a tutor." For a moment his eyes closed, shutting out the past. When Lupin's eyelids opened leadenly Snape could see the last of the Veritaserum passing from the wizard's tired, amber gaze. "Dumbledore has refused to hire someone for the Head of Gryffindor in a bid to shame me into taking it." He let out a sigh. "I've been thinking lately I may have no choice."

Snape fingers drummed angrily upon the arm of his chair. "I have no love for Gryffindor and its students, but they do not deserve this. You are caught up in your work as Deputy, are you not, Lupin?"

The werewolf nodded. "What are you thinking of, Severus?"

"Accept the position, Lupin, and go see your Lions. I have no doubt that with Minerva gone, they are in need of a good guiding force."

"Severus! I can't possibly...!" Lupin began to protest.

"Do not quail on me now, Lupin!" Snape thundered, his voice making the other man sink further into the sofa. "You already told me how much you did for the Mortimers and their children. Instead of four children, you now have the House of Gryffindor, and I am quite certain you can be what they need."

"I don't want the damn job, Severus!" Lupin shouted back.

"Then take your carcass from the castle and leave!" Snape rose from his chair. "Make Dumbledore hire somebody else if you haven't the stomach for this!"

Lupin had risen to face Snape, but something in the other man's demeanor made him pause. "No. Something is going on." A tendril of understanding crossed his features. "Has this to do with Harry?" Snape's lips pursed tightly shut. "If this has to do, somehow with Harry, then I have to know, Severus. His parents..."

"I'm his father!" growled Snape, keeping the falsity alive.

Lupin snapped right back, refusing to be cowed, "James was Harry's father when you weren't around!" He lowered his voice to an apologetic, cajoling tone as he continued, "As I was once his friend, I owe it to him to make sure that Harry is safe," Lupin said in a cajoling tone of voice.

Snape didn't quite answer as Lupin expected. "If you wish to truly be on Harry's side then take the job and become Dumbledore's lackey, Lupin."

Lupin's brow beetled as he was still a bit puzzled. Slytherin machinations always gave him a headache. "Allow me to visit with Harry."

Snape stepped back. His dark gaze hardened and he turned slightly towards the fire.

"You gave me Veritaserum, Severus." Lupin shrugged. "No doubt you brewed it, so I doubt it is as fallible as that stuff is that the Aurors have. Either you trust me, or you don't. If you still think of me as an irresponsible wolf who will endanger your son, and all of the students of Hogwarts, then say so now and I will pack my bags, and leave. I won't return."

Snape turned a narrowed gaze upon the werewolf. He would not admit that he was rather pleased by the wizard's continued showing of the backbone he never seemed to have as a boy, and, it appeared, a bit of Slytherin bargaining. He nodded. "You can visit Harry, but you must allow me to prepare him first."

Lupin sighed. He turned away and walked over to Snape's door. With a wave of his wand, Snape opened the door. "Thank you, Severus." He started to leave, but Snape's voice stopped him.

"Be prepared for some difficult questions from the boy, Lupin."

Remus Lupin merely nodded and left.

Saturday, Nov. 9, 1991

Harry wasn't talking to his father. In support of his best friend, Draco decided he wouldn't talk to Professor Snape either. Both boys had learned of Hermione's whereabouts at breakfast and Harry was angry that his father had never come back to the common room to tell him if Hermione was all right.

The rumour circulating was that Hermione had gotten lost in the depths of the dungeon (which sometimes happened to first years) and she had panicked. As it was very cold where she was found, she had succumbed to hypothermia and was being treated for it.

Up at the staff table, Snape was uncomfortably aware of his son's pointed, and angry glances at him. He knew he should have returned to at least tell Harry what had happened to Hermione, but the truth was that he had simply forgotten. After that long, and revealing conversation with Lupin, he had gone to bed with the remnants of a very low headache.

Snape had Floo'd Poppy early that morning and had asked her to keep Hermione there. He realised he needed to have a talk with the girl before his son came to visit. As Harry aimed another dirty look at his father, Snape sighed knowing that he would have to have a talk with his son, as well.

Rising from the remains of his coffee and breakfast, Snape left the staff table and went down to the Slytherin table. He stopped by

Harry and Draco. "I will be speaking to Miss Granger this morning. You may both visit her in an hour."

"Yes, sir," said Draco obediently. Harry said nothing until Draco nudged him.

"Okay... sir."

Snape didn't reply to his son's hesitation and left the Great Hall for the Infirmary.

Lupin, who had gotten very little sleep last night, was now in his office and dealing with the never-ending paperwork. Not for the thousandth time did he wonder why the Headmaster's correspondence was funneled through his office. Most of it was from parents, of course, and the other was the obligatory owl mail junk that was a ever-growing stack of brochures that advertised everything that a school such as Hogwarts was apparently in desperate need of. Most of those Lupin threw away.

A few pieces of the owl mail were missives from the Ministry, but it all came from minor departments, and workers who usually wouldn't be allowed to speak directly to the Headmaster. Lupin would open those, skim over them, and depending on the subject matter, either he dealt with the correspondence, or forwarded it on to Dumbledore.

It really made him miss his tutoring position. He felt like nothing more than a glorified secretary, or worse, an errand boy.

Leaning back in his desk chair, he put down his quill, and thought back to his mornings at the liaison's mansion. Right about now the butler, Jabot, would be bringing him his tea just the way he liked it as he prepared the day's lesson plans for the Mortimer children. Or, as it was a Saturday, he and the children would be taking morning tea together as they planned an excursion.

The youngest, Alyce at the age of nine, loved the park during clement weather and she always asked for that. Her twin, Austin, was enamored of the nearby arcade and always saved his coins for it. Wendy was thirteen and had recently begun to see the appeal of boys. The eldest, at sixteen, Quincey, jr. made it his job to watch over Wendy.



All of the children had been home tutored by Lupin. He'd waited with Quincey senior at the birth of the twins, and he admitted to himself, that he had grown to love each of the children.

Lupin had never envisioned an end to his time at the Mortimers. Of course he knew everything came to an end sometime, but he had hoped that he would remain in the position for as long as the children needed him. He had thought, at first, that he was being let go when Quincey had come to him one evening.

"...it is an opportunity, Remus," said Quincey as he handed the tutor a small glass of brandy. The liaison between the Ministry of Magic and the Prime Minister of England was a wiry, thin man with dashing wavy brown hair, and intellectual, square-framed glasses that framed intelligent, blue eyes.

"I understand that, Quincey, but I had hoped to stay here... well, as long as I was needed." He glanced down at the brandy, disheartened. Of course he wasn't being let go, but he felt no better knowing that he had been offered the position of Deputy at Hogwarts. "Why wasn't the position given to one of the teachers?" he asked suddenly.

Quincey leaned back in the overstuffed, wing-backed chair. He shrugged. "I suppose no one wanted it. As I understand from Headmaster Dumbledore, Professor McGonagall resigned from the position because it was too much for her on top of her other duties. I have to believe that although qualified, none of the other teachers really wanted the extra work."

Lupin swirled his brandy snifter. "If anyone finds out what I am..."

"Doesn't Dumbledore already know?" asked Quincey.

Lupin nodded. "I would never have been able to attend Hogwarts had it not been for Albus. It was he who has kept my secret all these years."

"I suppose he's also the one that kept you from registering as a werewolf when the Dangerous Creatures Act was passed in 1972?" asked Quincey.

"I wouldn't have been allowed to continue at Hogwarts if I had registered." He sipped at his brandy. "If it weren't for you and Anne, I wouldn't have the life I have."

Quincey smiled. "True, but just think, Remus. You'd be back in the wizarding world where you could use your magic again. And, at Hogwarts." He stood up. "Also, I know you're paid well here, but the Deputy Headmaster position would pay you better and it would put you in a position to possibly help others like yourself. Opportunity, my friend." The politician patted his shoulder and left Lupin to think about his future.

"Opportunity, my furry foot!" he grouched as he watched three owls dump more mail onto his desk.

"Good morning, Remus!" The Headmaster used the connecting entrance between their two offices to sweep in, rather too merrily, wearing yellow and orange robes that were beginning to make Lupin regret his meagre breakfast. "You wished to see me?"

Lupin watched as the Headmaster seated himself and his eyes were twinkling, rather knowingly. Lupin suppressed his sigh. "I have decided to take on the duties of Gryffindor's Head of House, Albus."

Dumbledore beamed and clapped his hands together. "I am so pleased to hear that, Remus. I do regret that I sprung the job upon you, but I only did so because I have faith in you, my boy." Lupin smiled, warily. "I think it would be a good idea for you to call a meeting there this afternoon. I shall go with you and smooth over any difficulties."

Lupin held up his hand. "I have a few conditions, Albus." The twinkle in the Headmaster's eyes dimmed slightly, but the smile remained in place. He looked askance at the newly arrived correspondence. "I don't see how Minerva managed this job for so long practically on her own." He shook his head, then spoke firmly, "Therefore, I would like someone, preferably someone already on staff, to assist me once a week for three hours. In turn, I want that person financially compensated."

Dumbledore shook his head slightly. "I'm not sure that could be done, my boy."

Instead of bluntly addressing the Headmaster's disapproval, Lupin took another tact, "I realise what you went through in thinking of me for this position, Albus, and truly, I am honored by your trust and faith in me. However, you must understand that I only accepted the position as your Deputy because I wish to meet Harry and hopefully to become a part of his life." His amber eyes sparkled disarmingly and Dumbledore smiled briefly, though he was listening with trepidation. Lupin could tell that the older wizard was not looking forward to having another argument with him as there had been over the unexpected addition to his duties, that of the Head of Gryffindor.

Dumbledore nodded slowly, "Yet you see some difficulty in that goal."

"To say the least, Albus." Lupin sat back down at his desk and began to sort through the mail he had received as he continued, "You misled me about Severus' distrust of me." He glanced sideways at the old man who appeared rather unconcerned about what his Deputy had just accused him of. Lupin continued, "I quite understand that he would not care to allow me near his son. However, I think it possible that were he my assistant, I may be able to convince him that I do not wish to bring any harm to Harry, and that I would very much like to resolve our differences."

"Very sound reasoning, Remus, and I would have no hesitation in speaking to Severus upon your behalf. In regards to your need of an assistant, that is," Dumbledore spoke graciously. Lupin continued his sorting and did not look up from his job, nor did he say anything. "Even though Severus has aided you two or three times..."

Lupin put down the mail in his hands and laced his fingers together as he leaned slightly upon his arms against the surface of his desk. "I'm afraid I will have to insist upon this, Albus. I know you need both a Deputy and a Head, but I admit, here and now, I do have my selfish reasons for having stayed this long. James was my friend despite our parting ways in our sixth year. Harry is, regardless of what Severus' potions say, a link to the past I've lost." Lupin let out an aggrieved sigh. "I shall say it one last time, I wish to resolve my differences with Severus so that I may be permitted a place in Harry's life."

Dumbledore was immensely satisfied to know that Harry was so uppermost upon the young wizard's mind. He anticipated some

adversity in convincing Severus to accept additional duties as Lupin's assistant; especially since his Potions professor seemed to be getting more intractable lately. He would accomplish it, though. He needed Remus, compliant, that is, and he did not wish to have to remind his Deputy that the life he'd had so far was due in great part to Dumbledore having kept Lupin's secret.

"I believe then, my boy, that we are in accord with what is most important here." The Headmaster rose from the chair he'd been seated in and smoothed his beard. "I shall speak to Severus later this afternoon."

Lupin smiled warmly, "Thank you, Albus. Now, I think I need to get back to clearing my desk."

Dumbledore chuckled. "That you do. And, I shall meet you afterwards to greet your Lions." He bowed slightly and left his Deputy's office.

Once the older man was gone, Lupin dropped his head into his hands. I am not cut out to be a Slytherin, he thought wearily. Yet, he had discovered that the man he had thought of as savior, mentor, and then friend, was very well equipped to be as crafty as any Slytherin he knew. No. That was unfair to Slytherin. Albus was a manipulator who would use whatever he had to gain the agenda he desired. Somehow, that made the old man seem even more dangerous than a long, disembodied Dark wizard.

"Just what is going on here?" Lupin asked the silence. It was a question he would get an answer to; from Snape.

Hermione had just finished breakfast when her Head of House arrived in the Infirmary. She gave Snape a shy smile as she shifted against the pillows behind her and smoothed her blankets.

"You are looking much improved, Miss Granger," he noted that although the child smiled at him, there was a melancholy tint to it. He summoned a chair and drew it close to the edge of her bed.

"I'm feeling okay, sir," she spoke quietly and then glanced nervously around the infirmary before settling her gaze onto her hands.

"Professor Lupin and I found you after curfew last night, Miss Granger." She said nothing. He observed as her fingers laced together haphazardly and tightened in what had to be a painful grip. He leaned forward and pried the fingers apart gently. "The mirror that we found you in front of is a most insidious Dark Artefact," he said, still untwisting her tight grip upon her fingers. "Men have been known to have wasted away over the pleasant dreams it reveals to them." Once the fingers were all loosened, he patted the child's hands as they rested on top of the blanket. "We found that you had passed out." He raised his dark eyes to capture her soft brown orbs in his solid gaze.

Hermione drew in a steady breath, "I couldn't look away, sir," she whispered. "At one point, I think I did, but the mirror wouldn't stop with the images and I couldn't... I couldn't keep my eyes away."

Snape nodded solemnly, "For some odd reason, the Mirror was drawing your magical energy from you." Hermione clutched her chest and gasped. "Have you any idea why it might have done that, Miss Granger?"

She frowned in thought, then spoke carefully, "It's supposed to show what you desire," she said softly. "And, it did, at first. I saw my parents..." her voice faded as she realised that her Head of House was listening. She hung her head. "I saw them as they should have been, but I knew better. I knew it was all false, sir. And, I told the mirror it was and I got mad... at them, and at the mirror. Then I saw..." she stopped, feeling as though she had confessed more than enough.

"It showed you what you truly desired?" Snape asked warily.

Hermione nodded. "But, it kept switching between the truth and what I desired. It, it was sickening. Like a very bad carnival ride."

A tiny tear slipped from one of Hermione's eyes and she sniffled in shame. "I love my parents, sir, I really do."

Snape noted that the girl seemed more to be trying to convince herself than him. He remained quiet, listening completely.

Hermione's fingers began to twist together again, and Snape leaned forward once more to part them. When he did so, her left hand

convulsively grasped at his own left hand. He did not pull away as she twined her fingers in his and took a deep breath as she continued to hold on.

"My father was... disinherited by his family when he married my mum. I've never met anyone from his family and da' just doesn't speak of them. Mum's always talking about them, though. They're supposed to be very important, you know? Mum has shown me photos of them in the papers doing all these charity things. And, she wants us, me and her that is, to be with them."

Another tear slipped from her eye and splashed upon the back of Snape's hand. It was getting uncomfortable leaning over in this awkward position, so he moved to sit upon the edge of Hermione's bed. Now he took the child's other hand in his so he was holding them both. This prompted more from the girl.

Hermione's voice wavered once, but became strong, too strong for an eleven year old. She went on to tell her teacher about all the plans her mother had once had for her. There had been music lessons, etiquette lessons, speech lessons, more lessons than even Snape had ever guessed one could subject a young child to. Almost from birth she had been taught to read the classics and then, after her sixth birthday, her mother had taken her to ballets and Shakespeare plays.

"One afternoon we were supposed to go see Madame Butterfly and da' got into an argument with mum over it because he didn't like the adult themes. While they were yelling at each other, I ran out of the house and down the street to the park..." that confession brought forth a flood of tears and Hermione couldn't speak for a moment.

Snape gave the girl a handkerchief to blow her nose while he dabbed the tears away. Finally, she blurted, "They both hate me because I'm a witch!"

"They are your parents, Miss Granger, and you their daughter..."

Hermione interrupted sharply, "I heard them arguing! Mum was disappoint... disgusted by my magic and da' he just wanted to give up." Tears spilled down her cheeks. "They both wanted to give up on me."

In distress, ashamed, and hiccuping from her tears, Hermione related one of the many terrible arguments her parents had had when she had received her letter from Hogwarts.

Jean and George Granger had made the trip to Diagon Alley for Hermione's school supplies and it had been a nightmare for the poor girl. Her father had remained silent, while Jean had criticized everything she saw. Upon getting home, her mother's words had been so hateful, not just towards her own daughter, but Jean Granger had also denigrated her husband for having produced a mutant for a daughter.

"And da', he simply said he could only agree and locked himself in his study!"

The girl gave him the most mournful expression he had ever seen before on a child. There was loneliness, hurt, and, most distressing of all, the desperate hope in a child that loves two people who do not return it. He wasn't at all surprised to find himself with a lap full of sobbing child. He sighed, silently, as he reminded himself that this was one of his littlest Snakes.

Snape couldn't solve all their problems, but as their Head of House, he could be there to hold them when the tears became too much to bear. After all, a faraway voice deep in his memories, whispered to him, how many times did you wish to be held, and no one would?

If any of Snape's colleagues were asked not a one of them would say that Professor Severus Snape was the sort of man to comfort an upset child. He rather considered he wasn't, but in his mind, his Snakes were different. For one, as their Head of House he was responsible for them, as a parent might be, for the time they were at Hogwarts. That explained his strict rules, the bedtimes, regulation of diet and making certain that his Snakes ate at the proscribed times, regular medical check-ups, and the monitoring of their study time, homework, and grades.

Snape didn't particularly like offering such 'Hufflepuff' comfort to his Snakes, but he at least understood that to be thrust into a strange world at age eleven where most of the school was naturally indisposed towards you because of your House affiliation, was not an easy thing. In his nearly eleven years as a Head of Slytherin House he had dealt with homesickness in first and second years,

abuse (as many of his Snakes came from the hard homes of ex-Death Eaters or Pureblood families that practiced a harder discipline), onset of puberty (never a comfortable time no matter how old an adult he was!), broken hearts, loneliness, tragedy (illness at home, or death in the family), the loss of a familiar, and more. No adult in charge of a group of children in which he needed the children to trust him (keeping his Snakes from becoming eventual recruits for the hoped for rise of Voldemort was only one of many reasons to cultivate their trust) could ignore a child in need of a kind touch, or even a hug. His prefects helped with such comfort, but sometimes he was the only one around.

When the new Potions professor and Head of Slytherin House had had his first year with his Snakes, he learned that his own personal comfort didn't matter when it came to something that his Snakes, his children, needed. No, he did not much care to be touched, or hugged, and he made sure that the adults around him knew it. The rest of the students might think he was a 'looming bat' or a 'greasy git', but the fact was, they were not his Snakes and therefore what they thought did not matter.

Holding the upset girl in his arms, Snape now had a better understanding of Hermione's need to be better than everyone else in everything she did. She was seeking approval of all the adults around her, but none of them really mattered when the approval of the two adults she wanted would doubtfully ever give it. Not for the first time did the Potions Master regret the fact that Hogwarts staff didn't have a better idea of the sort of home life their Muggle-born children came from. If anything, he expected it to be harder for those children who had to leave behind parents, and siblings, who may not entirely understand just what it meant when their child had magical powers.

In Hermione's case, her father was apparently an inattentive sort, whereas her mother had planned her daughter's entire life from birth to be some sort of Social instrument that would allow her mother into those prestigious circles she wasn't permitted access to due to her less-than-acceptable familial circumstances. When her mother learned that those plans had all been scrapped because Hermione was a witch, Snape had no doubt the woman had simply turned away from her child. And, her father? Had he taken his daughter's side? Supported her possible future? Obviously the man hadn't.



Hermione had wept herself into exhaustion so Snape tucked the girl back beneath the blankets as she slept. For a moment he remained by his little Snake's side. After fifteen minutes he rose, did a quick Scourgify to clean the area on his robes that had received the most of her tears, and left the Infirmary. It had just now struck him that he had not received any correspondence of any sort from the Grangers.

There was a mystery now. It was Lucius who had told him that the Grangers had wanted an official report on the incident in which Hermione had been hurt by three Gryffindors. As she had still been in Gryffindor House, he would not have received any correspondence from the girl's parents, but now he questioned if there had been any at all. He would write to the Malfoys to find out if they had ever spoken via parchment to the Muggles.

Once his correspondence was completed, Snape decided it was time to speak to his son, who was undoubtedly still angry with him for not having told him about his friend in the Infirmary.

Snape found Harry with his Draco outside the library in one of the wide corridors as they watched snow falling outside. In the distance was Hagrid's hut swathed in white and looking as picturesque as any greeting card with the smoke from the fire puffing from the chimney. The Potions Master only gave the pretty image a cursory look as he blended into the shadows to listen to the two children speak.

"Don't you have to dance at a ball?" asked Harry of Draco. They had been discussing the famous Malfoy's Winter Ball.

"I can dance, but kids aren't really expected to beyond the opening waltz," replied Draco.

"I don't know how to dance," Harry began drawing squiggles in the condensation his breath had caused on the cold windows.

Draco breathed upon a pane of glass and began to draw, too. "My mother says that Hogwarts should have classes that teach dance, and etiquette, and stuff like that."

"Why?"

"Well, because," Draco stated matter-of-factly.

"Because, why?"

Draco shrugged, since he really didn't have the answer. For a moment longer Snape watched as the two boys kept drawing, happily enjoying each other's silence. He gave them another moment, in case there was more to their conversation. When it was clear there was not, he stepped from the shadows and spoke, "Gentlemen."

Draco let out a gasp and Harry jumped. The boy then exploded angrily, "That's not funny!"

"I am not aware that I was making an attempt at humour," Snape comment drolly.

Harry glared sharply and then turned back to the window. "It's Saturday, so we don't have any classes, so what do you want?"

Snape leaned against the wall to eye his son. "I came to let you know that Miss Granger will be leaving the Infirmary today after she has had a bit of rest. You are both welcome to visit her should you wish."

Harry grunted, but said nothing else. Oddly, it was Draco who asked the question Snape thought he would hear from Harry. "How come you never came to tell us what happened to Hermione, sir? Harry couldn't sleep at all and I kept having awful dreams."

Still looking at the window, Harry showed he had been listening by nodding in agreement.

It was getting a little chilly in the alcove by the windows, so Snape cast a general Warming Charm and then transfigured a nearby, small gargoye into a bench that he seated himself upon. "It was my intention to return and to let you both know what happened with your friend, but I had an unexpected meeting that ran late and I..." he sighed as he chose to confess his flaw, "I simply forgot."

Draco accepted the excuse and expected no more from his Head of House. However, Harry did expect more and he faced his father with a stern expression and his arms crossed over his narrow chest. Snape thought the boy looked a bit like a miniature-me and very

nearly smirked over the resemblance. Wisely, he kept his stony, yet contrite visage visible, and regarded his son.

"And?" Harry finally prompted with an annoyed huff of his breath.

Snape inclined his head slightly in acknowledgment as he replied, "I apologise for my lapse."

Harry's posture relaxed and Draco glanced over his shoulder at his friend. Draco, who had known Professor Snape almost all of his life, had never known the man to apologise to anyone. It was weird, but he guessed that it was all right for the father to apologise to the son. That's what families did, right?

"So, is Hermione all right, Dad? Where was she?" asked Harry.

Snape would not go into detail, but he did tell them, "She is fine, now. Miss Granger had gotten herself terribly lost after remaining out beyond curfew."

Draco asked worriedly, "Is she going to get a detention?"

"As I have not yet spoken to Miss Granger about a punishment for breaking curfew, I will hold that decision in judgment until we may speak about her breach of curfew."

Both Harry and Draco nodded and started to leave, but Draco turned back. "Sir? If you do give Hermione a detention, just remember she's a girl, okay?"

Snape's eyebrow rose in question. "Indeed, Mr. Malfoy. And you have reminded me of this obvious fact for what reason?"

Draco smirked as though the reason were obvious. "Girls aren't like boys, sir, that's all. They're delicate, you know? So, if you make her clean cauldrons can you just make her not do so many?"

"You do realise that Miss Granger has done detention with me before?" he asked the two boys.

"Yeah, but," said Harry slowly. He didn't finish his thought.

Draco smiled smugly, "And you weren't mean to a girl, were you, sir?"

Snape nodded curtly, releasing the boys. Only after they had vanished from sight did he allow himself to laugh.

Sunday, Nov. 10, 1991

Snape was unable to speak to Hermione until after breakfast Sunday morning. He sent her a small note to see him in his office. She quickly read the note, ignoring the inquisitive heads of Draco and Harry that tried to read over her shoulder. Once finished, she folded the note and tucked it into her robes and finished her grapefruit. Both of her friends had respected her desire to not talk about what had happened to her, despite their obvious curiosity.

"You going to be okay, Hermione?" asked Harry as he watched his friend pick up her ever-present bookbag. Even on weekends the girl wasn't far from it.

"I'll be fine, Harry. I really shouldn't have been out after curfew," she replied.

Draco grinned, "It was a great try, though, Hermione!"

She smiled at Draco, hefted her bookbag over her shoulder, and left the Great Hall for her professor's office.

"Enter," Snape's voice came from within the office after Hermione's shy knock. Hermione opened the door and Snape glanced up from a stack of essays he had been grading. She stopped at his desk and he regarded her for several minutes before remarking, "You are a clever girl, Miss Granger. I have never had a first year figure out that my alarm could be circumvented by staying out of the common room after curfew. Second years, a few, but never a first year." He watched as his lips thinned tightly as she did her best to suppress a smile at the compliment. He continued, "Fortunately, you did not know that I also have an alarm that lets me know that someone is missing."

"So you could find me," Hermione said quietly.

"Indeed," he replied starchy. "I expect, though, you will now think twice about attempting to circumvent my wards." Hermione nodded. "I always require verbal answers, Miss Granger," he prompted.

"I won't do it again, sir," she agreed. Hermione gripped her hands together tightly behind her back.

"Finally, we must address your unauthorised effort to access the Restricted Section." Hermione grimaced slightly. "I know you are familiar with the rules regarding the Restricted Section, Miss Granger?"

She nodded dejectedly as she recited, "First and second year students are not allowed in the Restricted Section of the library. Third years are allowed if escorted by a teacher. Fourth through seventh years are granted access if they have a pass from their Head of House."

Snape rose from his desk chair and slowly moved around to stand in front of the first year girl. "Hmmm. How odd, Miss Granger, that despite you clearly knowing what the rules are in regards to the Restricted Section, you felt not a one applied to you."

Hermione looked up at the disappointment in her teacher's eyes and sniffed back a tear. She didn't get to cry this time. She really had not been thinking, one little bit. Her obsessive need for research had taken over and she just had not thought out, at all, what she had been intending to do.

"I wasn't really thinking, sir," she said lamely.

"No, Miss Granger. You weren't. A young lady with your intelligence should have been able to get into the Restricted Section and out with at least one book before Mr. Filch and Mrs. Norris had even entered the library on their patrol." As he swept back behind his desk, Hermione's mouth dropped open in astonishment. Snape seated himself with a dramatic move that billowed his robes in a neat drape behind him. He smirked at the open-mouthed child. "We are Slytherins, Miss Granger. Our stealth is legendary." He tilted his head slightly to the right. "You would still have been caught by me," Snape declared blithely, "but you would not have been caught by a cat and a simple caretaker."

"S-sir?" Hermione was puzzled. Were her actions, in some odd, back-handed way, being encouraged? "I don't understand."

"Let me be clearer, then, Miss Granger. I neither condone your intentions, nor your rule breaking. Neither do I approve your reasoning; that you wished to further your research into possession. You went about this entire adventure like a Gryffindor who only stops to think what she is doing at the last minute and I know you are more intelligent than that. So, in addition to a detention this evening at 6pm with me, I expect an essay from you on how, precisely, you should have handled this little episode." Snape paused as he caught a slight smile from the little bookworm. He held up a hand, stopping any expression of joy as he warned, "As scintillating circuitous as I expect your essay to be, Miss Granger, there is only one, acceptable outcome that I expect for your conclusion. Omit it, and your essay will just earn you another detention. Understood?"

Hermione gave him a wide-eyed look as her mind already spun over the content of her essay. She nodded sharply, then whispered, "Yes, sir. I understand."

Snape dismissed Hermione and she, somewhat dazedly, walked out of her teacher's office. In her mind rang the question, what was the only outcome?

Hermione spent the rest of the afternoon in the Slytherin common room working on her essay for her punishment. She had most of her homework completed, except for a test in Charms that she would review for on Sunday.

At one point Harry and Draco had arrived, looking for her to go play out in the snow with them, but she sniped crossly at them, and they wisely left the bookworm to pondering over her essay.

At a half hour before her detention, she despaired of ever figuring out what the outcome should have been. She glared into the fireplace knowing the answer had to be a plain and simple one, but she just wasn't thinking; thinking like a Slytherin, that was.

Hermione shifted as something lumpy and hard bit into her thigh as she sat gazing into the flames. Puzzled, she felt the odd lump and realised it was in her pocket. Slipping her hand into her pocket she

pulled out an odd little stone. It was the one she thought she had dreamt about while she was in the Infirmary.

Holding it up to the flames, its pink, flecked surface blossomed with sudden warmth. No longer pink, it was now a deep, translucent crimson. So surprised was she by the stone's change, Hermione almost dropped it. She marveled at how the flames weren't simply reflected in the stone's surface, but appeared to burn from its very heart. It was very beautiful!

A sound of Salazar Slytherin's portrait opening had Hermione stuffing the stone quickly back into her pocket. It poked her thigh again, but a better shifting on the sofa had it out of her leg's way. She promptly forgot about it.

Snape had retreated to his private lab to brew some potions for the Infirmary and to advance a bit of his latest experiments when his lab Floo flared green, allowing the only person to have access to his lab, into the private setting. Dumbledore brushed away at the soot on his orange and yellow robes, and gave Snape his most disarming smile. The Potions Master sneered while he put three bubbling cauldrons under a Stasis Charm.

"And how is Miss Granger today, Severus?" asked the Headmaster as he slowly walked, as if interested, past a shelf of cauldrons and other lab implements.

"Miss Granger is fully recovered and is working upon an essay I assigned her for yesterday's little adventure," Snape replied. Casting sidelong glances at the Headmaster, Snape added, "I do have to wonder how a Dark Artefact like the Mirror of Erised found its way to Hogwarts."

Dumbledore plucked a silver stirring rod from the rack of stirrers on a shelf. He bounced it in the palm of his hand to gauge its weight. "We really must do some spring cleaning of this castle, my boy." He twirled the stirrer until it was nimbly taken from his hand by a silent and wandless Summoning Spell from Snape.

"Spring cleaning," nodded Snape as he put down the silver stirrer on his work table.

"I confess, there are so many storerooms... well, junk rooms some of them, and not all of them carry the benign within. I rather stumbled, literally, over the Mirror of Erised this Summer." Dumbledore turned to his Potions professor and smiled apologetically. "I still get lost, at times." He shrugged and then continued his perusal of the lab to include the shelf of weathered, leather covered Potions journals, books, and periodicals. "Fortuitous, though. It was perfect for the Philosopher's Stone."

Snape suddenly stopped his careful count of stirring of the one potion in front of him. His gaze narrowed, but settled on nothing as the Headmaster was now behind him. "What do you mean, Headmaster?"

"I know that we have had sharp words as concerns the Stone, my boy, but you really must trust me. I would never bring harm to the children in this school..." he looked up from the book he held in his hands to greet Snape's glare. The young wizard had abandoned his potion and had turned to face the Headmaster. "The traps set are a mere diversion, my boy," said Dumbledore returning his attention to the book and flipping a page. "Would it have eased your mind had you known, for certain, since my word appears to be dust to you these days, that the Stone has always been perfectly safe?"

Snape's teeth ground together angrily for a moment. "May I remind you, Headmaster, that we now know, for certain, that the Dark Lord is within the walls of Hogwarts? He has killed three unicorn and two Centaurs. It quite appears that he was in possession, if not still, of Quirinus Quirrell. Might I also remind you, sir, that it was you who told me that you do not trust Harry Potter, my son, because he might be another Dark wizard?"

"I never said that Harry was another Dark wizard, Severus," admonished Dumbledore. "But true, I did not trust him. However, he did cast a Patronus. Wandless. And, as I believe, it was quite a powerful one." Snape frowned, letting Dumbledore see his puzzlement. "A Dark wizard is incapable of casting magic that is pure Light."

"I am a Dark wizard," grumbled Snape.



Dumbledore chuckled and patted the younger man's arm. "You're not Dark, my boy! Acerbic, snarky, a stickler for rules and such, but you're hardly Dark."

Snape crossed his arms over his chest belligerently. He refused to outline his many sins to Albus Dumbledore. The man was very well aware what he had done as Dumbledore's spy. Perhaps his transgressions did not make him Dark, but his soul was certainly rather smudged.

"Regardless, Headmaster," Snape waved his hand sharply at the man. "The safety of the Philosopher's Stone matters little to me. I am concerned about a much greater threat that endangers all the students. HE is in this school yet you have done nothing more than had me Legilimens Quirrell."

"On the contrary, my boy," said the Headmaster as he replaced the book back on the shelf and moved to stand in front of Snape. "I have cast a series of wards around the Infirmary to further trap the spirit of..."

"The Fiend," corrected Snape.

Dumbledore nodded. "Yes, yes. Voldemort is trapped."

Snape was not cheered by that information, especially when the Headmaster's eyes wandered over his shoulder to one of the bubbling cauldron. Shrewdly he concluded, "Yet you are not certain that it could be trapped in the Infirmary."

"I am sure that he is!" Dumbledore's eyes returned to those of his Potions Master. "A Fiend, a disembodied spirit, requires a living anchor. Harry, being quite young, may have been enough for Voldemort to 'hold on' to life, but Quirinus made a better anchor, and if Quirinus had sympathies for Voldemort, it may make him, even in his coma, a strong anchor."

"However, something still disturbs you about Quirrell and the Fiend, Headmaster," deduced Snape.

"Voldemort, Severus," Albus corrected wearily.

"I will no longer dignify that evil with a name, Headmaster. If you do not care for the technical term of Fiend, then I shall be more than pleased to use Harry's appellation of 'monster'," stated Snape.

"Tom Riddle, then," snapped the Headmaster. "To answer your question, although Tom is trapped by my wards, I haven't a way to destroy him." Dumbledore suddenly changed the subject with an unconcerned smile. "Until we can deal with that, though, I have come down here for another matter, Severus."

"And what might that be?" asked Snape warily.

"Poor Remus is finding his duties to be a bit more than he can handle and I have agreed that he is in need of an assistant." Snape's eyes narrowed sharply in warning, but the Headmaster had deftly turned away to run his fingers over the clean and drying phials. "I suggested you since you have assisted Minerva before in the Deputy duties, and I do understand that two or three times you have also helped Remus get settled in."

"I teach, Headmaster. I am Head of Slytherin House." When it appeared that the older man wasn't listening, Snape added, "I find myself the father of an eleven year old boy, who was abused by his guardians. I am busy."

"One day a week, Severus, and just a few hours out of the day." The Headmaster turned back to his Potions professor. "Ah! You could even bring Harry with you, Severus. Don't you think it would be nice for him to meet a contemporary of Lily and James?"

Snape glowered in reply.

Dumbledore let out a mild huff of irritation. "Whatever you choose, Severus. However, I think you can take a few hours out of one day of the week to assist Remus. Decide on a day, and then notify the man."

At that point it was an order and no longer a request. It did not matter, of course, that he was already inclined to help the other wizard after having put him through a session of Veritaserum. Snape simply turned away from the Headmaster and back to his potions. He wished he could say that he was unaware of the old fool departing silently, but he wasn't.

An unscheduled, and completely useless (meaning surprise) meeting with the minor Board of Governors delayed Lupin's meeting with his soon to be new responsibility, that of Head of Gryffindor House. Tea was shared, Dumbledore had nothing but praise for his new Deputy, and Lupin figured out very quickly that no one on the Board knew of his subsequent appointment as a Head of House.

After an hour in which personal questions were asked, ad infinitum, and his office was scrutinised, Dumbledore ushered the five minor members of the Board out of Hogwarts and returned to escort his Deputy to Gryffindor tower.

Two elves had been dispatched while the wizards made their way to the tower, to gather together all of the House. Upon entering, they discovered an absolute disaster.

The Gryffindor common room was a mess. Homework and even someone's clothing littered floor and furniture. Books were left haphazardly wherever and some had fallen to the ground. What was worse, though, was that some of the older students had turned the common room into their very own 'snogging pad'. Dumbledore's eyes lost their twinkle, and Lupin ground his teeth together so hard, he let out a low growl that warned the students present that there were adults in the room.

Lupin snapped sharply, "Get this mess cleaned up in fifteen minutes or Gryffindor is going to have an unprecedented 200 point loss today!"

Dumbledore gave the younger man an approving smirk as the students in the room jumped to their feet and began to clean. "I have a feeling we ought to inspect the dorms as well, Professor Lupin."

Lupin nodded sourly. He hated even imagining what could be going on in the dorms.

Fifteen minutes later, every last Gryffindor was roused from whatever they had been doing (and there were a few who shouldn't have been doing what was discovered they had been doing) and were now shabbily assembled in the common room.

Dumbledore's gaze was like chipped ice as he addressed the students, "I had never thought to express my displeasure in my own House. I am dismayed to have seen displayed here this late afternoon the worst traits of Gryffindor. As such, as of this moment, the two prefects are dismissed from their duty." He glared tightly at a young, and very pretty seventh year girl whose cheeks appeared to be permanently stained with a blush of shame. Beside her, a pale seventh year boy, swallowed convulsively. He did not wear his school robes, but his white shirt was noticeably inside-out.

Snickers from the twins were immediately quelled by a warning snarl from Lupin. He took over, preventing Dumbledore from saying anything else. "I am Professor Remus Lupin, your new Head of House." Lupin quelled the rise of rather sarcastic applause with a simple, hard, amber glance. "What I found here today is simply appalling and it will not be repeated. Is that understood?" It took a minute before the assembled Gryffindors realised they all needed to politely respond in the positive. When they did so, Lupin continued, "By this evening I will have the wards back in place on the girls tower, and wards shall also be mirrored on the boys tower." That drew a few 'awwws' and a 'booo'. "Quiet!"

Dumbledore glanced over at his Deputy. It was rather amazing how Remus managed to settle down his lions without yelling. Perhaps the young man had more control over the wolf within than he expected.

"New rules will also be posted this evening. Any infraction to these rules will be dealt with immediately. There will be no negotiation."

"Good grief! Do you think you're Snape?" grouched a fifth year boy. "I suppose you're going to try and give us bedtimes like little firsties!"

Lupin smiled thinly, and it wasn't a pleasant smile. "Ohhh, why give bedtimes to just the first years, Mr. Poppins? Everyone in Gryffindor will get the same bedtime until this House shapes up." There were more groans until Lupin let out a low, menacing growl that quieted the common room. "Everyone get to your dorms and clean them. Including the bathrooms. Now."

The students all fled, with the exception of Fred and George. Lupin eyed the twins for a moment who smiled heartily, and then marched up to their dorm.

"A bit harsh, weren't you, my boy?" asked Dumbledore quietly.

"At first, perhaps, Albus. Once the lions figure out that I am their Alpha, it will go much easier for them." Lupin led the Headmaster out of Gryffindor tower.

"I rather think, Remus..."

Lupin interrupted firmly, "As you recall, Albus, I didn't want the job." For a moment they walked in uneasy silence down the corridor to Lupin's office. Before disappearing inside, the Deputy Headmaster asked, "Did you speak to Severus?"

A/N: This chapter is dedicated to OregonBird for her in-depth, thought provoking review. It just proves that I am a better writer because of you folks. I only wish to tell you the best story I am able and it is a joy to do this all for you.

Just a note regarding Remus Lupin. I thought he came off as a bit of a pushover in the books and movies and I rather think he was quite a bit stronger than that as an adult. Consider how scary it must have been for him as an eleven year old at Hogwarts with a secret that could literally get him killed by the Ministry. The wizarding world has not been good to him so I think, if he found a way, he would retreat to the Muggle world, thus the backstory I have given him, and that he has more backbone than Dumbledore expected.

I am having a contest for the 1,000 reviewer. Whoever leaves the 1,000th review will have a short story written just for them. It will star, of course, our favourite Potions Master, and anyone else you wish. The subject matter will be my choice with the exception of slash or graphic sex. I just can't write those convincingly.

Sunday, Nov. 10, 1991

Harry woke in the early hours of Sunday from a simple nightmare. Well, none of them were simple, these days, but those nightmares he still had of the Dursleys were relegated to simple.

This was one of those not-so-simple nightmares. They were of his Uncle Vernon, and no one else, and if anything, these nightmares had a creepiness to him that was worse than those nightmares that made him relive memories of being harshly spanked, or beaten, or shouted at viciously.

The darkness of the dorm felt alive this night after the nightmare. Lcky and too close. He started to slip his feet over the bed when he glanced down cautiously at the edge.

The dorm beds were large, old-fashioned frame beds that were high up off the floor and had posts that supported a canopy and heavy, velvet drapes. Both Harry and Draco had to literally climb up into their beds, and when they were finished studying, and just being silly before bed, they would have running-jump contests in which they would both run towards their beds and try to leap up onto them. Of course there were bumps and bruises, but nothing terrible, and Harry felt it was all right to get a little bit hurt if you were a kid who was just doing normal, stupid-kid stuff.

At night, though, the space under his bed had begun to unnerve him. It made him think of his cupboard at his relatives house and how, with the stairs above that defined his ceiling, nooks and crannies had been created that never saw light. When he had been very little, these shadowed places had scared Harry because his imagination went a little too wild. There were spiders, too, even though he was as meticulous as possible about getting rid of the spiders and sweeping away their webs.

Those fears that Harry thought he had left behind in the cupboard, had followed him to his Slytherin dorm and were settling into the dark space beneath his bed. As much as he tried to tell himself that there was nothing down there to grab his ankles, he still could not help himself when he woke at night and jumped off his bed, as far away from imaginary reaching claws, just to go to the bathroom.

Tonight, though, the monster under the bed wasn't some creature with lots of teeth and long claws, but his Uncle Vernon. Harry knew, from first hand experience, that as fat as his uncle was, he had a swift, and long reach.

Peering, still, over the edge of the bed, Harry slipped his wand off the night table and pointed it menacingly down towards the floor. "You stay put, Uncle Vernon," Harry whispered softly. "I've been practicing that Stinging Hex Draco showed me and I bet I could hit you in the eye with it."

At that moment an eerie whistle slithered into the dorm with a cold chill. Harry forgot, just for a second, that Draco always opened the window on his side of the dorm just a crack before they went to bed. That fact didn't matter. The scary, whistling moan was enough to impel the little boy like a shot off his bed and scampering towards the soft light of the bathroom.

Once bathed in the safety of the light in the bathroom, Harry grabbed his dressing gown from his hook on the back of the door. He wanted his slippers, too, but they were under his bed and there was no way he was going to get them now.

Taking a deep breath, Harry ducked out of the bathroom and trotted swiftly past his bed, and out of his dorm. Torchlight, gentle at this time of night, lit his path down the stairs and into the common room. He picked up his pace again, and soon he was through the portrait of Salazar Slytherin and running for his father's quarters.

Snape had not yet gone to bed by the time the antique mantle clock, a Muggle treasure his mother had given to him when he was a child, chimed the turn of Saturday into Sunday. He was reading one of the books that Hermione had no doubt hoped to get her hands on when she had tried to access the Restricted Section of the library after curfew. It was titled, *Origins of Possession* by Nara Yaga.

As intriguing a read as the book was it so far had yielded no clues in what to do with a possessing spirit. The content was rather lurid tales of witches and wizards possessed by everything from pixie breath to poltergeists to benign hauntings and finally to Fiends, of which it had been determined that the spirit of Voldemort now was.

Snape had learned that Fiends were basically like any other common, castle ghost, only these spirits were completely Dark. They were not spirits that roamed castles or arcane places that held some attachment for them and neither were they mischievous, sometimes cruel energies that caused general mayhem when they manifested. Fiends were almost always the spirits of Dark wizards or witches who held onto the living world because of a desperate need to control and harm the living. Fiends were clearly evil, and it was perhaps, a good thing that they were also quite rare. Death, it appeared, was often a final baptism that would cleanse a departing soul; even those that had been tarnished. It afforded Snape a sliver of hope that his mistakes, misdeeds, and Darkness committed whilst he was a spy, would ultimately be forgiven.

Just as Snape shut the book firmly closed he felt one of his internal alarms that meant one of the wards around the Slytherin common room had been crossed. With a tired sigh, the Head of Slytherin House rose from his comfortable chair and Summoned his teacher's robes as he prepared to go after whatever student dared to trifle with his wards and take to wandering. When his front door to the outer corridor opened, he paused in adjusting his teaching robes. There, in the doorway, with his long hair tousled by disturbed sleep, his dressing gown, bare feet, and oddly holding onto his wand as though it were a lifeline, was his son.

"Harry?" Snape shrugged his robes off onto his chair and went over to the small boy who gave the appearance of someone having made a long trek over infinite terrain.

"Could I have some hot chocolate, Dad?" Harry asked with a slight yawn. He slipped his wand into his dressing gown pocket now that he felt safe enough to walk without it in his hand.

"Have a seat, son. I will get things started in the kitchen." Snape passed Harry as he sat down on the sofa and briefly touched the child's head. Harry let out a relaxed sigh and curled himself up more comfortably in the soft sofa.

Harry had obviously had a nightmare, but at least not a vision. Harry reacted with much more fright to those. Here, the boy's body language told him that he was bothered by his nightmare, but not so enough to alarm the entire castle.



As Snape fixed the hot chocolate, he held the hope that his son would relax enough on the sofa to just drift back into sleep. Ten minutes later, as he levitated two steaming mugs of chocolate out into the sitting room (one was bitter chocolate and plain, whereas Harry's had whipped cream and little chocolate shavings melting into it) showed him that his son was still wide awake.

Harry's gaze had been fixed upon the flickering flames in the fireplace and his expression was definitely that of a troubled child. He sent his hot chocolate to a small side table where he had placed the book he had been reading, and then he floated the other mug over to Harry.

Harry gripped the mug, fortunately spelled to keep fingers from burning from hot liquid, he wrapped his hands around the warm mug and inhaled the delicious aroma of the chocolate. He blew his breath across the surface to cool it for his first sip. When he was ready, he tentatively brought the mug to his lips, delicately sipped the hot beverage, licked the small mustache of whipped cream off his upper lip, and sighed as that which could only be described as safety and comfort slipped down his throat and warmed him like the rays of sunshine did on a new day.

For a long several minutes, father and son enjoyed their chocolate in silence. When Harry was halfway through his he lowered the cup, still between his hands, so it almost appeared as though his hands and body were wrapped around the mug.

"Did you dream of the Dursleys again, Harry?" asked Snape gently. Harry nodded swiftly. Snape encouraged him to speak, "Can you tell me anything about it?"

For a long breath Harry was quiet and then he whispered, "It was Uncle Vernon. He... he..." Harry's cheeks coloured deeply.

It took every ounce of control Snape had to keep the anger from his face. Ever since he had learned of the elder Dursleys vile proclivities towards young boys he had worried about what other abuses his son might have suffered. Madame Pomfrey's scans had been thorough and did not show any physical damage to indicate sexual abuse, but those Diagnostic Spells could not show the more subtle forms of such abuse, nor the psychological damage, and it sickened Snape, especially since he had assumed, after seeing the results of

those scans, that Harry's abuse was only broken bones and bruises. If his son was about to tell him it was beyond that, he would find the fat man, and kill him. No hesitation. He would destroy that filthy Muggle.

Harry coiled himself a bit tighter about his near empty mug of hot chocolate and focused his gaze upon his knees. "Uncle Vernon was drinking... well, like he always did... I uhm was about 4 or maybe three and well, I was cleaning the living room and I was doing my best job ever and staying out of the way." He shuddered and drew himself tighter into a ball. "I kept feeling him looking at me. It made me feel..." Harry gripped his belly and rubbed it as though the chocolate had hit him badly. "Sick like and I kept telling myself not to turn around and look at him... don't look, freak, keep dusting, dust, dust, dust..."

Snape stiffened as his son's voice changed. It was softer, timid, and sounded like the frightened tones of a much younger child. When Harry spouted another litany of 'don't look' and 'dust, dust, dust', he thought he should bring Harry from the spell of his dream, but the moment he moved, the boy folded in upon himself and his voice rose as the litany sped up. Snape's heart sped up as well, and just when he thought he would ignore his son's flinching and pick him up, the child abruptly returned to the present.

"I looked, Dad!" Harry's green eyes caught his father's and his face reflected confusion. "A smile is supposed to be nice, right? But Uncle Vernon's wasn't nice. There... there was something... yuck." Still there was that confusion, but in those green eyes was the inexplicable plea for forgiveness!

What did that monstrous whale do to my child? Snape's mind hissed to itself as the Potions Master left his chair and went to sit beside Harry on the sofa.

For once Harry did not lean into the older man for comfort choosing instead to burrow as deeply as he could into the plush arm of the sofa. Snape felt his heart plummet as he realised that Harry, at the moment, did not want his father's touch because he was a man.

Be afraid, Vernon Dursley, his thoughts threatened. Muggle law is not enough to protect your worthless hide. I will skin you and find the Darkest potions to use your remains in, you vile excuse for a human!

Snape remained on the sofa, but shifted slightly as he increased the distance between himself and his son. That small motion allowed Harry to relax his body.

Although Harry did uncurl, just a bit, he still could not face his father. Shame swam through him like a loose sea monster, and as much as he wanted to just bury himself in the Dark Man's protective embrace, Uncle Vernon's hungry smile kept them apart. He gripped his mug of hot chocolate, but he didn't dare drink anymore in case his belly, feeling upset, might get worse.

"Little One, I know it is hard, but would you at least try to look at me?" Snape's voice was gentle, soothing; the same voice he used when he visited the unicorns or Thestrals.

Harry's head turned slightly, and though he found it difficult at first to look up into his father's eyes, when he did so, he found simply understanding, acceptance, and love. He couldn't, yet, take advantage of his father's comfort, but he felt much more at ease just allowing that ebony gaze to touch his soul.

Seeing his son's ease, Snape asked carefully, "Harry, did your uncle ever touch you?" Harry's eyes widened a moment in fright, but his father continued, his voice at its most velvety, gentle, "Not to hit you, but did he ever touch you in a way you felt he should not? A way that was wrong?"

Again Harry clutched his tummy tightly and then, to Snape's horror, the boy nodded.

I will eviscerate that bastard! I will flay him alive and feed that pig his own intestines! I will make him regret his miserable...

Snape cut his anger abruptly. Revenge would come later. He drew a controlled breath in through his nose and refrained from the instinct to offer a comforting touch. "Please, don't stop talking to me, child. That pig will never get anywhere near you again. I promise." The anger had tinged his assurance and Harry inexplicably flinched against the sofa arm. Snape evened out his voice before asking, "Tell me what he did to you, Little One."

Harry shook his head, and for a moment Snape thought his son might not say anything, but then, his child's voice emerged, weary, yet steady, "Aunt Petunia had to take Dudley to the doctor. Uncle Vernon wanted me to dust the living room and I did. I kept feeling his eyes on me and it was creepy. It was like... like invisible hands. I had this really weird thought that if I just didn't look at him, I'd be all right. Over and over I kept telling myself, don't look, just dust. But, I did look! I turned around and he was right behind me and Uncle Vernon was smiling and then he grabbed me. I thought he was going to hit me!" Harry's knuckles whitened against his stomach. "B-b-but he gr-gr-grabbed my the string I used to keep my trousers up and he br-br-broke it, and he..." Harry's uncertain recitation abruptly stopped as he stared up into his father's dark gaze. "I didn't mean to do it! I just felt so sick, but I couldn't help it! Honestly, Dad! Please don't be mad at me, please, Daddy?"

Somewhat puzzled at his son's silent plea for forgiveness, he cajoled carefully, "What happened?"

Harry nearly blurted the answer, "Uncle Vernon flew across the room and he didn't wake up. Not until Aunt Petunia came home."

Snape let out a steady breath of relief. He reached out and touched Harry's cheek with the backs of his fingers. When his son leaned into the feather-light touch, Snape cupped the boy's warm cheek. "It was Accidental Magic, child. You did nothing wrong."

"But I hurt Uncle Vernon, Dad," Harry said with anguish.

"And he deserved it, Harry," Snape declared sharply. He was amazed at the forgiving kindness in his child's heart. It was endless.

In reply, Harry blinked and shook his head. Snape caught his son's chin between his thumb and index finger to stop the shaking.

"Listen carefully to me. Your aunt and uncle did not deserve such a loving child as you. They constantly hurt you by hitting you, breaking bones, bruising you, starving you, and making you live in a cupboard. Vernon Dursley was going to hurt you worse than he had ever had before and you knew that; deep down. It is why you felt so sick and uncomfortable with him watching you." Harry was desperately listening, frozen by his father's words. "Tell me, did your uncle ever try to touch you that way again?"

Harry shook his head firmly. "He said I was 'repulsive'. After that... uhm... Uncle Vernon wouldn't just slap me anymore. He took to hitting me really hard after that."

Though it was odd for him to be relieved that Dursley had never subjected Harry to his sick needs, Snape had to admit that there was some relief that his son would never have to deal with the consequences of such abuse. Snape closed his momentarily then opened them. Vanishing the half empty mug of chocolate from Harry's lap, he gathered the boy into his arms. He squeezed his child tightly, but not so tight that it was uncomfortable.

"Your relatives were the repulsive ones, my dearest child. You are kind, thoughtful, and loving and they were simply the worst sort of humans." He touched his chin to the crown of Harry's head. "I wish so much that I could have taken you away earlier, Harry."

Harry sighed, and pulled slightly away so he could see his father's face. "Will there be a someday when I don't have nightmares about them anymore, Dad?"

"Someday, Harry, but it will take time," Snape said a little regretfully.

Harry gave his father a shy smile, "But, you'll always be here when I do have nightmares, right?"

Snape smiled then, "When you are a grown man with little ones of your own, should you have a nightmare, I will still be here for you. Forever and always, Harry."

A slight giggle escaped Harry, and he teased, "You'd let me on your lap when I'm grown up."

Snape's eyebrow rose, "Well, you'd be a bit big for that, I'm certain, but I'm sure, if you'd allow it, I could still give you a hug."

"Oh yes!" agreed Harry. "That has to be forever and always!"

Harry joined his father for breakfast since he stayed in his room after getting back to sleep. Snape had ordered a large breakfast of Belgian waffles with blueberries and strawberries, sausage links and bacon, and orange juice for them both.

"Do you have school stuff to do today, Dad?" asked Harry.

"My grading is all complete so I'll be assisting the Deputy this morning and then brewing this afternoon." Snape took a sip of his bitter coffee. "Have you finished all of your homework?"

"Almost," replied Harry. "We have a test on Monday in Herbology so I have to do some review. Draco, me and Hermione are going to quiz each other this morning."

"Very good. I'd like you to join myself and the Deputy at eleven for tea," said Snape.

"Me? Why?" Harry looked up from his last bite of bacon.

Snape took an uneasy pause before revealing, "The Deputy Headmaster was a friend of James. He is looking forward to meeting you."

Harry blinked in awe. The Deputy knew his father? He'd be able to ask all sorts of questions, then, right? "Does he, uhm, know about the adoption, Dad?"

"He does not, Harry, so it has been a little difficult for him to swallow our story." Harry nodded sympathetically. Harry knew that their story didn't paint his mother in a terribly flattering light, from the bit Snape had told him of the story, but he figured his mum was all right with it since his Dark Man was taking such good care of him and giving him a happy life.

"He knew my father... er... my uhm, James?" asked Harry.

Snape paused at Harry's hesitation. "Harry, you do know you can call James your father, do you not?"

Harry nodded. "I do, Dad. It just gets confusing, you know? He's really my real father, or dad, or pop, or whatever I would have called him. Then, for our story he's my stepfather, but everyone else thought he was my father... uhm, when I was a baby. And then... uh-hm..." he shrugged. Poor Harry was so confused, he couldn't even finish his thought.

"Just save yourself the trouble and call James your father, Harry," Snape spoke quietly, yet decisively. "It is easier to let everyone else sort it out for themselves."

"Okay," Harry agreed. "So, he and my father were friends? Were you friends with him, too, Dad?"

Snape's eyes hooded closed, slightly. There was no way for him to avoid the past and James' part in it.

"We weren't friends, son," Snape began. "Your father and Professor Lupin were, but only for their years in Hogwarts. The professor left for the Muggle world when he finished school." He went on to explain about Lord Mortimer, his family, and that the man was a Squib, but also the Liaison for the wizarding world.

To Snape's expectation, and tiny bit of dismay, Harry latched onto the bit of information about why he and Lupin had not been friends. In clipped tones, he expanded upon the tidbit of information and told his son that they had been in two different Houses and Slytherin and Gryffindor's rivalry was perhaps at its worst.

"It did not help that your mother and I did our best to hold onto our friendship, even though she was in Gryffindor and I was in Slytherin. James Potter and Sirius Black were the most negatively vocal about our friendship and they did their best to denigrate me in Lily's eyes." Harry's gaze narrowed sharply, but part of what his father had said puzzled him. "Denigrate - to treat as though I lacked in value or importance. They belittled me with insults and nasty nicknames, and did their best to catch me unawares in the corridors with hexes and jinxes."

Harry's eyes widened and he let out a gasp of indignation. Snape thought, at first, that his son was angry with him. "My father was a bully!" At his son's angered expression, he felt a bloom of warmth within knowing that his child was angry on his behalf.

"To be fair, Harry, I must admit that I did manage to give back as good as I got. James and I were unfortunate, regular visitors to Madame Pomfrey's care." Snape smirked lightly, a quiet sign to Harry, who had found the statement funny, to giggle a bit.

Snape rose to his feet and lifted his son from his chair and stood him on his feet. "Some children are awful, Harry, and it has been difficult for me to forgive James and his friends. No matter how once I felt about the boy, as your father, he loved you greatly. It is that man that you must remember, and respect."

Harry let out a breath of relief. If his father, his dad Severus, hadn't wanted him to like James Potter, he would have disliked him for Severus. He hadn't wanted to, but the truth was, he loved his dad, and if it had hurt Severus to like James, he wouldn't have. He was pleased, and relieved that his Dark Man didn't want him to hate James. Impulsively, he hugged his Dark Man. "Thanks, Dad!"

Snape smiled and patted his son's back. He then added, with a slight, good-natured smirk, "James could not help telling everyone about all the mischief you got up to from birth."

Harry dropped his head suddenly into his hands. "Oh no! Did he show everybody photos of me taking a bath?"

Snape smirked as he rose from the table. "Oh, I am quite sure he did!" he teased.

Harry gawped as he looked up at his father. "Did you see photos of me... naked?"

Snape seemed to consider the question seriously. "Hmm, there might have been one or two, I believe."

"Ugh!" Harry grabbed his bookbag and practically sprinted like an escaping hare from his father's quarters.

The Silver Trio were neither in the library nor in their study room in Snape's office. They were in a storage room in the dungeons that had old, broken desks, and chairs stacked along its four walls. A large painting of a sunset over an ocean with a terrible hole in the middle of it leaned up against a portion of the broken furniture. Across from the sunset was a still portrait of a one-eyed man with a patch that looked a great deal like a historical pirate. Also in the storage room were odd Rubric-like gee-gaws, and a tall cabinet painted in garish purple and gold with yellow Chinese dragons and hundreds of lush lotus blossoms all over it. Most interesting of all was the slightly bent, and very old skeleton of a small, winged



dragon strung by silver wire from the ceiling. The three children had spent a few minutes tiring their necks as they craned their attention to studying the fantastic find.

Hermione brought them all back to what they were in the storage room for, and they were in need of a place to sit.

Draco had discovered a rolled up bit of carpet that looked like it had suffered some burns on one edge. He had unrolled it to cover the stone floor and Hermione used Scourgify to clean the carpet of its accumulated dust. It was really a pretty piece that had the tale of Aladdin and the Forty Thieves within its threads.

Harry added some cushions to their find. Most of them either had been chewed by doxies, or appeared to have been the practice target for someone perfecting the Blasting Spell. None of them knew a Repairing Spell so Harry just turned the cushions to hide the worst of the damage.

Once their 'nest' was perfected, they all sat down and Hermione took a large volume out of her bookbag. Harry squinted at the book.

"That's a different book," asked Harry.

"This one goes into the Animagus transformation in more detail." She flipped the large book open. "And look at this!" She pointed at the chapter she had opened the book to. "Here's a potion we can brew that will show us what our forms are going to be."

"Let me see that." Draco turned the book and leaned over to read the list of needed ingredients. "We can buy most of the ingredients, but that one is really rare." He tapped his chin. "Professor Snape would get mad if he found out his Chameleon Skin went missing."

Harry glanced at Draco in worry, "We're not going to steal from my dad, are we?"

Draco shrugged, "Papa gives me a generous allowance, but not that generous, Harry."

Harry frowned at the recipe. "Do we need the potion?" he directed his question at Hermione.

She shook her head, "We don't, but it would make our visualisation exercises easier. Also, if we know our Animagus form, we can look up what each animal means for us."

"We don't get to choose?" asked Draco with disappointment. Hermione shook her head. "That's not fair," he grumped. "What if I wind up like something stupid like a porcupine?"

Harry chuckled. "That would be wicked, Draco! You could shoot quills at everyone."

Draco considered that, and then smiled. Maybe a porcupine wouldn't be so bad. "What would you want to be, Harry?"

"A dragon might be fun," Harry smirked.

Hermione shook her head. "Animagi can't turn into magic animals, Harry."

"So? I just said a dragon would be fun, Hermione. You don't have to be a spoilsport," he chided.

Hermione gave him an unconcerned moue. "Somebody has to keep to the facts, Harry, and that's me."

Draco and Harry both smiled and then moved to sit beside their bookworm friend who was back in charge of the book. For a long moment they were all silent as they studied it.

"We really should have that potion," said Draco.

"Without it, we'd still learn the transformation, but it would take a few years," informed Hermione.

Harry sighed heavily, "Maybe if I asked dad..."

"NO!" Harry was nearly deafened by the negative reply of his two friends.

"Harry," said Hermione firmly, "if your dad found out we wouldn't be able to learn how to be Animagi until our seventh year!"

"Yeah, but, we can't steal stuff," Harry almost whined. He grimaced at that sound in his voice. He was suddenly feeling wimpy. "Well... hmmm..." Needing someplace to stare at, Harry's eyes dropped to the list of ingredients. "It doesn't look like we really need a lot of Chameleon Skin," Harry said slowly.

"Yes!" crowed Draco with a hiss. Hermione grinned.

Harry frowned at the girl. "Hermione? You're always telling us to study and listen to the rules and stuff."

"She was out after curfew, Snape," scoffed Draco. "And your dad knew Hermione was in the restricted section, too."

Hermione blushed. "I was Sorted into Gryffindor, at first, Harry. Why do you think that was?" Harry's jaw slowly dropped open. She giggled.

"Yeah, you were," Draco nodded. "How come that was? You're real smart and all, you should have gone in Ravenclaw."

Hermione shrugged and shut the book. "I like to read. Everything." She stared for a moment down at her knees. "Mum sort of didn't like it and da' wouldn't buy me books because mum always told him that once I got a rich husband, I wouldn't need them."

Draco stuck out his tongue as though he had tasted something bad. "That's kind of dumb, Hermione," added Harry.

"My papa's rich and mother is way smart. I want to have a smart wife, too. So, did you go to a library a lot?" asked Draco.

Hermione shook her head. She then smiled slightly, "I was able to buy a lot of books second hand and such, but I had to keep hiding them from my mum and da'. Hiding stuff from my mum can be a real adventure."

Hermione then described all her hiding places that not only included the garden in their backyard but beyond the Granger house and throughout the neighborhood and town. She told them about the map she had created that led to all of her hiding places. They weren't all simple to get to. Many had steps to climb, or rocks or the way to get to them involved complicated paths through town, the

park, and even two that involved crossing a creek and disappearing down an abandoned culvert.

Both Draco and Harry were impressed. "Wow, Hermione, you really must like books!" declared Harry.

She blushed. "I like learning, Harry. Sometimes it's worth it to break the rules to learn something new."

Harry was dubious. Both Draco and Hermione were confident that they could steal the needed ingredient, but this was his father, Professor Snape, they intended to steal from. Harry smiled wanly as he listened to his two friends outline plans for the acquisition of the Chameleon Skin. If his father should ever catch them, it wasn't going to be pretty.

Draco returned to the Slytherin common room to finish some homework. Hermione, it seemed, wanted to go to the library. Harry departed from his friends and made his way up to the Deputy Headmaster's office.

Hermione did not go to the library, though. She found herself inexplicably drawn towards the Infirmary and so, with a sure foot, she made her way there. Madame Pomfrey was nowhere to be seen and before she knew it, Hermione was standing over Professor Quirrell's bed.

Only for a moment had his expression been placid, untroubled in his coma. Upon her arrival the comatose wizard's features contorted and he let out a moan that was a long and drawn out sigh.

"It's pretty, isn't it, Professor?" In her Hermione's hand was the curious stone. Originally a mottled pink with granite-like flecks of black in it, the stone was now a rich crimson and almost transparent.

Quirrell let out a very soft, sighing moan again, but Hermione, mesmerised by the stone she held, was unaware of it. After several seemingly long minutes, she tucked the stone back in her pocket and left the Infirmary. Not once did she look back at the wizard who writhed as if in pain upon his bed.

Ssssoooo closssse, whispered a reedy thin, barely substantial voice deep within Quirrell's mind. Waken... waken...! I want... that... sssstone!

The voice faded as its strength dwindled, smothered by fear from Quirrell. He had tried... tried so very hard with every, broken, thread of his magical core... day and night his mind fought the evil that was so... deeply... rooted within. Quirrell was losing... falling into that irresistible pit of comfort... sweet, unconcerned, uncaring bliss where he did anything for his Master. Unwilling, yet willing... and he knew he would die... Quirinus was prepared to die... if only to destroy the infection deep in his psyche...

Quirrell's body jolted spasmodically as the voice, still faint, crawled upward in his consciousness, an unwelcome, primordial ooze.

Shhhh, let me do everything, my little sssslave... let goooooo...

Quirinus fell, and fell, and fell so far away... and he cared not one bit as he allowed a familiar fog of apathy swallow him further away.

The Deputy Headmaster's office entrance was guarded by a tall, wide suit of armor that must have protected a very large man at one time. Curiously, though, this suit of armor had a crown of silver and gold upon its helmet. For a moment, Harry, who felt too small in front of the armor, just stared up at it. His head was tilted all the way back as he wondered how he was supposed to get past the suit and into sharing tea with his father and the new Deputy.

"Do you need a password?" Harry finally asked the armor.

The gauntleted hands clanked together bringing the halberd in its left hand into both hands and now in front of the suit of armor. Harry yelped as the heavy halberd dropped toward him, stopping just an inch above where his head would have been had he not jumped backwards. Suddenly the armor slid aside to reveal a tapestry. The tapestry then was pulled aside and there stood his father.

"Dad!" Harry exclaimed with relief. "I thought the suit of armor was going to kill me!"

"Henry just wanted a password, son, and I forgot to give it to you. Come inside." Snape held the tapestry up and Harry went under his father's arm and into the Deputy Headmaster's office.

The Deputy's office was circular with a cone-shaped ceiling in which the large skeleton of a Gryphon hung above the office. The bookshelves were shiny brass and glass lining about a quarter of the walls. A very large fireplace dominated the office and the crackling fire was flanked by two sentinel gryphons. Across from the fireplace was a large, ornate desk of white pine carved with ivy and flowers that twined around the graceful legs and along the edge of the surface. It was covered with neat stacks of scrolls and parchments. The chair, also of white pine, was cushioned with white silk. Harry wouldn't know it, but this was all the décor leftover from when Minerva McGonagall was Deputy.

A slightly smaller desk of dark oak was against one of the long, thin windows. Seeing the green ink his father favoured, Harry figured this had been where he was working.

Snape's hand flattened lightly against the middle of his son's back. Gently he drew Harry in front of himself. Harry looked up at the Deputy Headmaster whom he had only seen once as a substitute in DADA class.

Remus Lupin was a slim man, but where Snape was wire and sinew, the Deputy Head was tight muscle. He was only a few inches shorter than Snape with straw brown hair oddly streaked by strands of grey. Upon his cheek were thin, criss-cross hatchings of very old, pale white scars, and one eyebrow dipped slightly from a deeper, older scar that cut across the eyebrow, skipped the eye, and ended just below it. It was far from 'horrible'. Instead, the scarring gave him a weathered look that was disarmingly pleasant, and just a hint lopsided. The effect was enhanced by eyes of striking amber and a light smile that could easily be mistaken as shy.

The deputy wore a Muggle suit of brown and beige tweed. The coat had leather patches on the elbows and Harry was reminded of a funny English professor who tutored a teen vampire slayer in some show Dudley would watch sometimes.

Harry's innate distrust of new people kicked in unhesitatingly and he pressed back warily against his father. Although this man appeared

quiet, a lost-in-the-crowd sort of man, the little boy felt an instinctive sense of not fear, but caution settling into his bones. There was something that lay beneath the surface like a dozing, wild animal, and the last thing Harry wanted to do by accident was to waken this one's beast.

"Harry," said Snape, "this is Professor Remus Lupin."

Harry didn't glance over his shoulder, although he wanted to. He could feel how his father's body had stiffened as if the muscles underneath his skin had coiled like a cobra ready to protect his son. The small boy could also hear caution in his father's voice and a light sneer of dislike aimed at the Deputy; dislike that his father was doing his best to bite back.

Lupin crouched down to Harry's level and widened his smile. The amber eyes softened as though to tame the wildness the child sensed. Harry smiled cautiously in return.

"It's very nice to meet you, Harry," Lupin spoke gently.

The wolf within, now closer to Harry than he had been in DADA class, could now decode the confusion of scents from the boy that had briefly surrounded the boy in class. There was Harry's own distinctive odour, that of childhood, snowmen, of flying through the sky on Summer days. Then he sensed a much older aroma, that of James, excessive confidence, the mark of one who had to be a hero. Overlaying that was a much newer scent of spices, herbs, and shadows hiding secrets. This was the scent of Severus Snape.

He now knew what they meant and the secret that they held. In that brief moment, Lupin divined the truth between the father and the son. Snape had adopted Harry, but he had done it in such a way that all magical means would reveal the Potions Master as Harry's biological father. How it was done, the wolf did not know, but that didn't matter since he did know, for certain, that Snape would do anything to protect Harry, to keep his son safe.

Lupin looked up at the Potions Master and a look of knowing passed between them. Snape's gaze hardened in warning, but if anything, Lupin's own gaze softened more, extending his trust within his silence. Snape's fingers clutched possessively onto his son's

shoulder as another one of the old walls of resentment shattered beneath Lupin's gaze. In their exchange of saturnine understanding, Snape knew that Lupin had detected the magic of the adoption, yet the werewolf had no intention of sharing that truth.

Snape nudged Harry a bit forward, letting his son know that there was nothing to fear from the Deputy.

"Hi, Professor," said Harry quietly. "You knew James... I mean my...?"

Lupin interrupted, his tone subtly enforcing the falsity, "I did know James, Harry. Shall we have some tea and you may ask me any questions you'd like?" He unfolded himself and motioned Snape and Harry over to three chairs in front of the fireplace where a large platter with tea, cakes, and biscuits waited.

"Chocolate chip biscuits!" enthused Harry as his eyes widened with boyish delight. "My favourite!"

As they took their seats, Snape frowned at Lupin. "Sweets before lunch, Lupin? Are you taking a page from the Headmaster's book in regards to sugar? You had better not have sherbet lemons in that tin." He eyed a square tin that was painted with sepia coloured, Victorian flowers.

Lupin ignored the barb, which really didn't have as much sting behind it as it might have. He picked up the tin and plucked off the lid to reveal slim biscuits that were of very light, swirled and crisped pastry filled with the Deputy's favourite hazelnut chocolate. He plucked one out, put it into his tea, and swirled his tea with the confection. "I was never fond of sherbet lemons, Severus. However, it will be up to you to police your son's indulgence this afternoon." With a wink, though, he handed one of the biscuit sticks to Harry whose eyes were rather wide at the sight of the curiously yummy looking stir sticks.

After swirling his tea with his own confectionery stirrer, Harry started to reach for a biscuit, but glanced quickly at his father. "One biscuit or one cake, Harry," his son pouted. Snape was intractable, though. "Not both, you sacchariferous barbarian and you had better eat all of your salad at lunch."



Before choosing, he put down his tea and picked up his bookbag and plopped it into his lap. He rummaged for a moment before pulling a black leather covered book from the bag's depths.

"Some studying to do, Harry?" asked Lupin.

Snape was puzzled, but waited, just a moment to see what his son was up to. Harry was flipping through the pages. "Dad? How do you spell 'sacchariferous'?"

"Sacchariferous." His father spelled the word and sipped his tea as a knowing smirk managed to crinkle his eyes, just a tiny bit. Harry had made good on his threat and had ordered a personal dictionary for himself. The book was in his hands, which leaned on his bookbag still perched in his lap.

With a bright smile that showed triumph at the acquisition of new knowledge, Harry recited, "Sacchariferous – adjective meaning to yield sugar." He then stuffed his dictionary back into his bag, plopped it back onto the ground, and snatched a tea cake from the platter. His smile now smug and accompanied by a rather Dumbledore-ish twinkle, he bit happily into the still warm cake.

"Very good, Harry," Snape approved. "For showing the initiative in getting your own dictionary, you may have a biscuit, too."

"Thanks, Dad." Harry's reply was slightly mumbled from the cake in his mouth. A quick admonishing glance from his father had him mumbling a quick apology as he took a sip of the tea to wash down the cake. When he could speak properly, he said, "I just wanted to know what you were saying with all those big words."

Lupin chuckled, "Then I suppose you'll start going about Hogwarts sounding like your father?"

Harry shook his head. "No, at least not now. Draco knows a lot of big words, but he sounds right saying them. I'd probably sound poncey. I do like using big words as insults because someone like Crabbe or Goyle don't know what I'm calling them until they're grown-ups!" Harry giggled at his slyness. "I bet that's why you use big words when you're insulting people, Dad."

Snape's expression was one of his most snarky, used rather often in his Potions class, but for his son, there was a touch of warmth to the black eyes that could, at least in class, become so hard that all of his students swore they were rare, black diamonds.

"So, I can ask anything?" Harry had to make sure as he glanced over his teacup at Professor Lupin. It was one thing to ask his father questions, and that was okay because his father was his father. It would be rude to ask a stranger questions, even if he gave permission.

Lupin affirmed, "Anything, Harry. What did you want to know?"

Harry stared at the brown-haired man and did his best to not gawp like an idiot. Of course he had questions, but he couldn't think of any of them. It also didn't help that Professor Lupin was being so polite and expectant.

"I know," smiled the Deputy as he noted Harry's hesitation. "Why don't I tell you a few stories about when James and I were students?"

Harry smiled at that. Sipping his tea, he settled in his chair and listened raptly as Lupin related several stories from the days of the Marauders years in Hogwarts.

It was Snape who noted that all of the stories dealt with pranks the Marauders pulled on fellow Gryffindors, and those pranks were tame; hardly like the ones pulled on Slytherins, or Snape himself, for that matter. Even so, old hurt was being stirred up by the reminiscences. He began one of his Occlumens meditations to help quell those old emotions.

"Why did you call yourselves Marauders, Professor Lupin?" asked Harry politely, even though he knew he was interrupting the story about James and Sirius getting caught sending flying notes to each other in Charms class.

Lupin hesitated as he caught a rather pointed expression from Snape who appeared interested in the answer as well. He coughed slightly, "Well, that was Sirius' idea. He liked code names for everything and a favorite book series of his was about the wizard pirate Captain Toller, his crew, and his ship, the Marauder. They

were pirates who sailed the oceans in an enchanted pirate ship having various adventures."

Snape's eyes rolled. He was familiar with the series that were a favorite, even today, of most wizard teenagers. As a boy he had read one book, Captain Toller and the Marauder Finds the Hidden Island of Crystal, and had immediately decided it was the worst piece of tripe he'd ever wasted his time upon. "I should have known Black would aspire to be a pirate," scoffed Snape under his breath.

Harry's quick glance at his father was that of concern. Not once had the scowl on the older man's face been relaxed and Harry realised that his father was tolerating these stories from the past about James, barely.

The Potions Master was very good about not broadcasting his more turbulent emotions to most people, but such distress was somehow easy for his sensitive son to pick up on and when Harry felt this unease from his father, he wanted to do something to fix it. Putting down his tea he slid off his chair and moved to stand at his father's side where he leaned slightly against the armrest. Snape's arm moved automatically to the boy's waist and squeezed him in a gentle, one-armed hug. For a moment Harry smiled up at his Dark Man, his father, his daddy who comforted him when the shadows wouldn't stop being scary.

Lupin reared back, his head connecting with the upholstered back of the chair, as Harry's sharp, green-eyed gaze caught him by surprise. Harry's smile was dim, now, and although it still offered friendship, in the boy's eyes were a clear warning to the werewolf. It was, 'This is my daddy. Don't ever hurt him again.' He nodded, gravely, to Harry, acknowledging the silent threat with respect.

Snape, understanding the body language between the two, brought peace to the tension by speaking softly into Harry's right ear, "Remember what I told you at breakfast about James, son?"

Harry nodded, his gaze placid as he spoke solemnly, "He grew up." Snape's arm tightened around Harry's waist in approval and then, with a very slight smile meant only for his son, he nudged the boy back to his chair.

Knowing that he'd done well, and he had helped his father, Harry sat back down in his chair. The smile was gone from Snape's face, but so, too, was the tightness that had warned Harry of an impending migraine. With a look to the Deputy he gave Lupin an open, and forgiving smile, "Did you know my mum?" Harry asked.

"Not terribly well, Harry, but I do remember her. Lily was always busy with school, or her friends," quickly he glanced at Snape, and saw that the stoic, protective mask was back in place. "Lily was kind and always thought well of others..." he then chuckled, "and she was wicked with Charms. Did you know she invented quite a few?"

Harry's eyes widened. "Really? What did she invent, sir?"

That was news to Snape. Imperceptibly he leaned forward to better listen to Lupin's reply.

"Hm, well, probably the most well-known one, amongst mothers, that is, is called the Mother's Embrace Charm. This one is used to hold a newborn in the perfect position for bathing, feeding, or for changing nappies." Harry giggled and Lupin smirked pleasantly. "Along that line, Lily also improved upon the Skin Rash Healing Charm for children."

"However did you manage to learn about these, Lupin?" asked Snape acerbically, but still with interest.

Lupin glanced up at the dark-clad wizard, "Just before I went to work with the Mortimers I had a notion in my head about becoming a Healer and so Albus arranged for me to be apprenticed to Poppy. After I got the job at the Mortimers, I had thought to break my apprenticeship since I would be living in the Muggle world but she convinced me that Healing skills would come in handy when tutoring children. She told me that if any of the children were magical, I'd be thankful for her teaching." He smiled wryly, his blue eyes sparkling with humour. "Considering the family started with one child which multiplied into four, her advice was rather timely.

Lupin then quickly outlined other charms that Lily had invented and Harry began to note a pattern of similarity in his mother's spells. He observed, "These are all charms for kids, aren't they?"

Lupin gave the boy a wise smile, "I dare say, Harry, you were very likely the inspiration behind all of those charms and spells."

Harry grinned at that

Letters – correspondence exchanged during Sunday, Nov. 10, 1991

Severus,

Narcissa handed your letter over to me to address. I had been meaning to speak to you about the Grangers, but it has been a busy time. That, and I have been consumed in my research on Ancient Runes and Old Magic to deal with the problem in the Hogwarts Infirmary.

After the Sponsorship of Hermione was made formal, I wrote, as a matter of course, to the Grangers and explained the Sponsorship Program and how it would work for them and their daughter. Attached is the letter I received from them. It is the only letter I have received from the Grangers. To be honest, I am a little flummoxed over the content and am not entirely sure what to do. Narcissa has, understandably, been a bit more vocal on the subject. I had to restrain her the evening she read the letter as she was highly tempted to visit the Grangers personally to deliver her thoughts on their missive. I must admit, one is sorely tempted to call upon 'old friends' to deal with them, but I doubt Hermione would approve.

Any advice you might have would be appreciated.

Lucius

Copy of Dr. Jean Granger's letter to Lucius Malfoy. Delivery by Muggle Mail, then delivered by Hogsmeade Post Owl. Letter is dated October 16, 1991

Mr. Malfoy,

My husband and I have already received more than enough of your kind's correspondence than we care to receive. Yes, we know of the so-called attack upon the girl and we really are not surprised. Our difficult daughter never has known how to fit in and it appears she is carrying her habits to your world. I have told her since birth that if she wanted to get anywhere in life she would be doing herself a

favour by adopting the ways of those around her. As usual she must be different and so it only gets her into a mess. Quite frankly we are tired of it.

So, now you are sponsoring the girl? I would try to warn you that you are embracing nothing but anguish in her, but by your letter you sound quite a bit like we know her to be. I told George from the moment we found out she was unnatural and hardly to be considered human, that all we had planned for her was wasted and ruined.

She is your problem now, since it is obvious you didn't need our consent at all for this farce of yours. George and I no longer wish to be bothered and we leave it to you, as her sponsors, to have everyone who thinks they should keep us in the loop out of it. Blood isn't always as true as you believe it to be, and we are discussing adoption options for a more suitable child; as we should have before HER disappointing birth.

Dr. Jean Granger

Dr. George Granger

Lucius,

I nearly burned Dr. Jean Granger's letter after reading it. Perhaps you should have let Narcissa have her say. And, those 'old friends', I was inclined to add my request to yours. As you pointed out, though, I think Miss Granger would not be at all happy at our more aggressive solution to dealing with her reprehensible parents. It would also not do to circumvent the law, so perhaps a visit to the venerable Grangers is required?

I am highly disturbed by the fact that not once is Miss Granger referred to by name. How long, I must wonder, have they been so distancing themselves from their child?

If you have not already begun to do so, might I suggest you begin an inquiry into the legal ramification of the Sponsorship in regards to a possibly abandoned magical child born of Muggles?

Severus

Severus,

Next weekend I should like to visit the Grangers. Meet me at the Manor Saturday morning at 9am should you wish to join me.

Indeed, I have been looking into our Sponsorship of Hermione Granger and have learned that, oddly, it is not a legal matter for Wizarding Children Services, but of the Hogwarts Board of Governors. How delightful that I am so well acquainted with that august body!

This is the procedure:

We would have to effect a valid severing of Parental Rights from the Grangers – both Muggle and wizarding forms -and then present it to the Board.

Once the Board have examined the paperwork a Letter of Recommendation will be drafted and then summarily accepted by the Board.

WCS will then receive the letter and will authorise, without prejudice, formal Ministry approved adoption proceedings.

Although we hardly need Hermione's approval, as she is underage, I think she would wish to know of our intentions. I shall consult with Cissy on the matter and then we shall talk to Hermione.

Enclosed, please find a Howler for Hermione. Would you direct it to her at her next mealtime? I am not at all pleased by her behavior on the 7th in regards to the breaking of curfew. Although I have had no hesitation in applying punishment firmly and repeatedly to Draco's backside until his thirteenth birthday, I am not quite sure what to do about a girl in regards to corporal punishment.

Have you any further advice for me?

Lucius

Lucius,

The Howler will be delivered on Monday at breakfast.

In regards to spanking? Miss Granger will better remember your lessons if you take her books away. Similar to restricting play time. I have given Miss Granger detention for this Sunday in addition to an essay. Shall I pass on any further chastisement on your behalf?

Severus

Severus,

I believe you may add a suitable punishment for Hermione from me. Two weeks restrictions, if you would?

By the by, I do appreciate that you were more forthcoming with the details of Hermione's adventure and subsequent encounter with the Mirror of Erised. Dumbledore simply told us that Hermione had gotten lost, and then fallen and injured herself!

Were you aware that the Mirror of Erised is considered a Dark Artefact? In my library I found a book on historical Dark Artefacts and Objects in the last 500 years. According to my research, the mirror feeds upon the magic of those that get caught in its 'Spell of Desire'. More importantly, it once belonged to Gellert Grindlewald. According to the book, Grindlewald found a way to hide objects within the mirror. A very tricky business as doing such caused the mirror to become unstable. Please make very certain that Hermione truly is unscathed after encountering the mirror.

Lucius

Monday, Nov. 11, 1991

The Silver Trio were seated at the Slytherin table waiting for their breakfast to arrive. Harry asked Hermione, "Did you get lectured by dad... I mean Professor Snape for being out after curfew?"

"Yes, I did, of course," she replied a tad testily. "I've got a detention, too, this whole Sunday." Her oatmeal appeared before her and Hermione picked up her spoon and began eating it. She didn't like butter or sugar on it, which caused both boys to shake their heads. They had tried to convert their friend to the pat of butter and spoonful of maple sugar everyone was allowed, but she wouldn't indulge.



"I wonder what you'll do for the whole Sunday, Hermione," mused Harry.

"Professor Snape got a whole barrel full of Abyssinian Snails in this weekend and they're pickling all this week." Draco teased his friend with the information. "I think those are even worse to prepare than Bubotubers."

Hermione glared at Draco. "Eat your orange!"

Draco chuckled and Harry smiled. Hermione just ignored them until the mail owls arrived. She was caught off guard when two letters fluttered down in front of her. Hermione was about to reach for them when she heard Draco muttering, "Oh no!"

Glancing at Draco, Hermione saw that he was looking up above her. Her gaze followed until she saw a red envelope drifting, rather smugly, down towards her. Harry noticed that the entire Great Hall had become quiet.

The Howler stopped its descent just in front of Hermione. She stared at it warily. Draco nudged her sharply. "Open it!" he hissed, his voice harsh, but sympathetic. "Howlers only get worse if you wait."

Hermione's hands shook as she reached for the awful, crimson coloured Howler. Her stomach roiled horribly as she wondered how in the world her mother had sent one of these magical lectures to her. As her fingertips touched the envelope, it burst open. To her astonishment, it wasn't her mother's voice reprimanding her. It was Lucius Malfoy!

"Hermione, I am greatly disappointed to learn of your after curfew adventure in the library. Although it was a clever thought to circumvent Professor Snape's wards as you did, I am certain I will not be hearing of a similar indiscretion anytime soon." Hermione felt stunned, and sick, and absolutely terrible as she listened to Lucius' very controlled voice. "As for the Restricted Section, I am beyond disappointed at your flagrant violation of a rule that is put in place to keep you safe! No book, no research is worth risking yourself as you did, child, and you will not do so again, or believe me you will regret it!"

Hermione's throat had gone dry and she swallowed. She let out a startled yelp as the Howler burst apart and vanished. At that moment Tara Anglaise draped her arm over the first year's shoulders and handed her a handkerchief.

"Wipe your tears, Hermione," she said softly into the girl's ear so no one could overhear. Tara then patted Hermione's back gently. The first Howler was always tough for the first years.

"He didn't even yell," Hermione said somewhat in shock as she sniffled.

Draco nodded, "Yeah, he never does, but he did use The Voice on you." The boy shuddered as he referred to a certain tone of voice, full of disapproval and disappointment that Draco himself had only heard from his father as he grew up. Draco had long ago called that particular tone, The Voice. When he heard it, he knew he had to pay attention, or else. "That's even worse than yelling."

"Yeah," agreed Hermione.

"You okay, 'Mione?" Harry asked gently. His friend was still staring at the spot where the Howler had been and he guessed she had never gotten anything like it before.

Hermione turned to face Harry. "'Mione?"

Harry frowned. "What?"

"'Mione. You called me 'Mione, Harry," she repeated, strangely awed.

Harry didn't understand why she was being, well, weird, but at least Hermione wasn't thinking about the Howler anymore. "Yeah, I guess I did. I'm sorry about that, Hermione."

She smiled, "No, no, it's all right, Harry. I don't mind it. 'Mione is kind of nice."

Tara interrupted before the three could begin to talk about something else. She had noticed that one of the other two letters was on Slytherin House official parchment in their Head of House's

signature green ink. "You'd better open this now before you forget to, Hermione." Tara handed her the envelope.

"Oh! Yes, thank you, Tara." Hermione broke the seal of Slytherin on the parchment and then unfolded it. She read the terse and straightforward words. "Oh no! No, no, no! That's not fair!" she suddenly wailed as she dropped the letter.

"What?" asked Draco worriedly. "What's it say?" He and Harry both grabbed for the fallen letter, but it was Harry that snatched it out of the way first.

Harry read aloud, "Miss Granger, on behalf of your Sponsor, you have an additional punishment for your recent folly. For two weeks you are banned from the library unless accompanied by Prefect Anglaise to pick up any books that you need. Any and all recreational reading, as well as any additional reading that does not have to do directly with your classes, is hereby suspended for two weeks as well. I have taken the liberty of removing your extra reading material from your dorm and will return them to you at the end of your suspension. S. Snape, Head of Slytherin."

"Ouch!" remarked Draco. "Hermi..." he glanced at where Hermione should have been sitting. "Where'd she go?"

"Ohhhhhh," hissed Harry as he spotted Hermione. "She is soooooo dead!"

The young first year, quite full of hurt and indignation, was striding with purpose up to the staff table to confront Snape.

Snape had abandoned his breakfast when the Howler was delivered. He had hoped that it would have been Narcissa who created the Howler since he had heard Lucius use the same tone, the one Draco called The Voice, upon his own son. It was an unusual timbre that had no effect on adults, but perfectly made a child listen, with ever-growing dread, and then shame at whatever the child had done. Snape had to admit, The Voice was very effective.

Once the Howler was finished, Snape then watched as his letter had been opened. The girl had paled, at first, but then her cheeks had flushed. While Harry re-read the letter out loud, Hermione's eyes

had turned on him, broadcasting too well her anger. His gaze suitably darkened as she rose from her seat and strode towards him.

Before she could open her mouth to speak, Snape rose from his place at the staff table. Since the table was slightly raised on the dais for the table's placement, his height was even more imposing. He crossed his arms over his chest and gave her a warning glare.

"Miss Granger you will return to your table and accept your punishment with grace at once," he ordered in that dangerous, silken tone of his that caused a few of his colleagues to shudder.

Paying her Head of House's warning no heed, she shouted, "You can't take my books!" Hermione unwisely stamped her foot against the floor as she cried out, "They're mine!"

"Severus, you took her books away?" chided Minerva in quiet shock.

Snape glared with a flash of anger at Minerva McGonagall. In a very low voice that did not carry in the Great Hall, he hissed, "Do keep out of this, Professor McGonagall. I will deal with my Snakes as I see fit." With that he turned away, left the table and marched down to his defiant student.

Having affected such a strong approach, Snape had hoped to scare the little nitwit back to her table and friends. To his utter embarrassment, Hermione, stupidly, shouted at him again, "Give me my books back!"

Hermione was literally caught by surprise as the Potions Master grasped her by the upper arm, turned her a quarter turn, and landed the flat of his hand with a firm smack to her backside. Snape let go just as quickly, and ordered very sharply, "My office, Miss Granger! Now!" He then strode out of the Great Hall ignoring all the stunned looks of the students he passed by.

For a moment Hermione stayed where she was. Utterly shocked, and humiliated, her cheeks reddened as she realised what had just happened to her. Touching her backside briefly, she then broke into a run after her Head of House, all too eager to leave behind all those eyes staring at her, and the more subtle laughter.

At the Slytherin table Prefect Anglaise put an hand very lightly on Harry's forearm as he watched his friend running out of the Great Hall.

"He spanked her," Harry whispered, feeling a bit numb.

"She shouldn't have talked back to Severus like that," Draco grumbled. He didn't like what he saw, either, but he felt Hermione deserved that smack.

"But, why did she do that?" Draco's anger vanished as he heard the desperately confused thread in his best friend's voice. He shifted closer to Harry and gripped his hand, squeezing tightly. He knew he was one of the few people allowed to touch Harry so firmly.

Harry turned his gaze away from the spot where Hermione had been and looked into Draco's gentle, grey-eyed gaze that was filled with concern. "He's not..." he lowered his voice, "The Dark Man won't hurt her, will he?"

It was the fright in Harry's voice that chilled Draco and decided him as he rose from his bench. "C'mon, Harry." He tugged the slightly smaller boy from his bench and almost dragged him from the Great Hall. Out in the Entrance Hall, they moved quickly across the flagstones and to the narrow, arched doorway that led to the dungeons. "It's all right, Harry. Your dad isn't going to hurt Hermione. You'll see."

Having a purpose to focus on Harry now followed his friend down into the depths of the dungeon to where Hermione was now probably in the Dark Man's office awaiting further punishment. His mind hoped, feebly, that his father really wouldn't hurt her for talking back to him.

Back in the Great Hall, Prefect Tara was about to settle back to her breakfast when she noticed the last of the two letters and Howler that Hermione had received that morning, sitting by the first year Snake's empty place at the table. She picked it up and glanced at the writing on the front to see who it might be from. Frowning, she tucked it into her robes, and then returned to her breakfast.

Snape stood imperiously at his open office door as he watched a glistening eyed Hermione run the rest of the way down the corridor

towards him. His glare raked over her penitent form as he watched her slow down to a respectful pace that took her quickly into his office. He swept in behind her and allowed the door to slam shut in reflection of his ire. Hermione flinched appropriately and he went to stand behind his desk.

Hermione sniffled and as quickly as possible swiped at the betrayal of a few tears on her cheeks. Snape ignored that as he regarded his wayward Snake. She was contrite, certainly, but there was still a stiffness of indignation in the child's body language. Her attachment to her books was, possibly, a bit stronger than he had anticipated.

Nevertheless, he growled out in a rough, silken voice that reflected his exasperation with the child, "I have not had to strike one of my Snakes as I did you, Miss Granger, in five years. Your behavior was appalling. You brought your House into an unfavourable light, and you embarrassed me in front of my colleagues, the Headmaster, and all the Houses of Hogwarts." He noted that her chin began to wobble with the effort of suppressing her emotions. Sadness and remorse he expected, but it bothered him that the girl also appeared still quite angry with him." He lowered himself, with a touch of menace, into his desk chair. "You had better use that intelligence of yours, Miss Granger, and rid yourself of that righteous indignation you are harboring," he threatened.

Hermione gulped and tried, very hard, to push away her anger. It dissipated, but in its place was a very severe ache, and loss. More tears managed to escape and fall upon her cheeks.

"They're my books," she just managed to lament sadly under her breath.

With a nod of his head, he indicated an impressive array of books that had been carefully shelved upon one of his book shelves very recently. "They will be returned to you after two weeks, Miss Granger." His eyes narrowed as the girl's body almost sprang for the confiscated books. He was inwardly pleased when she reigned in the impulse to dive towards the books, and kept to where she was standing. An anguished longing for them remained, though, upon her stricken face. "As you can see, I have taken care of them and no one will touch them."

Snape's own anger was fading while concern for the child's untenanted emotions settled within him. Some anger, perhaps outrage at the knowledge of her punishment, was to be presumed, but this desperate attachment bordered on the obsessive and it concerned him.

Hermione sniffled, yet again, so Snape conjured a handkerchief for her and floated it towards her. She took it from the air and dabbed at the tears and blew her nose. "Thank you, sir." Her voice had been so soft Snape very nearly didn't hear it.

The Head of Slytherin wanted to comfort the girl, to let her know that his anger had passed, but she had broken two fundamental rules of Slytherin, and of his. They needed to be dealt with before he could deal with the problem arising from her additional punishment.

"Sit down, Miss Granger," he ordered curtly. When she gingerly perched herself on the edge of a chair, her spine far too stiff and straight, he continued, "I shall deal with the concern over your books in a moment, but I want you to realise what you did to receive that spanking."

"It was just a smack, not a spanking," she clarified, in a half-mumble.

His eyes narrowed in warning that she not contradict, nor correct him again. "Be that as it may," he bit out, "your behavior in the Great Hall was shameful and I warn you I will not be seeing it again. It was rather too Gryffindor in its delivery for my taste."

Hermione's cheeks blushed with outrage as her jaw fell open. "I'm not a Gryffindor!"

He sneered, "Aren't you? Roaming the halls after curfew? Trying to break into the Restricted Section of the library? Shouting like a banshee at your Head of House because of a punishment? Slytherins have more subtlety than that, Miss Granger. You have more decorum than that. I have seen you exhibit ladylike manners for a child your age so I know this display was beneath you. I expect better of you, Miss Granger!"

Looking into her professor's eyes, she could see the truth of his words, and the bitter disappointment he now had for her. For a brief moment that smack to her backside had stung, but not as much as

the disappointment her respected and most favourite teacher now had in her. That cut into her heart and she felt that it was something she would remember, forever.

Her shoulders drooped and her spine bent as all her dismay at her behavior spilled forth in remorse, "I'm so sorry, sir! I know I shouldn't have done it, but I was just so angry and I couldn't think straight!"

Snape didn't speak right away. Briefly he drummed his fingers upon the surface of his desk, then stopped and leaned forward a bit. "You were angry about your punishment," he stated.

"You took my books!" she snapped.

He glared warningly and his voice rumbled like distant thunder darkly, "Snap at me with disrespect again, Miss Granger, and I will have Professor McGonagall join us to witness a spanking that will have you unable to sit without a Cushioning Charm for a week!" His fist thumped on his desk and he ground out, "Thirty points taken for your behavior in the Great Hall, and fifteen points taken for now." Hermione's jaw dropped, but she snapped it shut as she felt her anger rising unbidden again. "Accio Calming Potion!"

The cupboard to the right opened and a potion bottle came sailing out of it and slapped into Snape's hand. He Transfigured a scrap of paper into a small cup, poured out a dosage and handed it to the child. "Drink it. I do not want anymore untoward outbursts as we discuss this difficulty you have with your punishment."

Hermione rose from her chair, took the cup and drank down the potion. It was a bit chalky, but its magic worked immediately to calm her emotions so she could think more rationally. She knew she really hadn't done herself any favours, and in fact she felt quite a bit like a lunatic for having reacted as she did. Hermione had mentioned, though, that she couldn't have stopped herself if she wanted to, and it was true.

Snape waited a few minutes for the Calming Potion to take full effect and then he asked, "Miss Granger, I had expected you to react with some resistance to having your books and library privileges removed but I did not anticipate your hysteria."



"My mum always called me hysterical," she bristled. "That wasn't hysteria... sir..." Suddenly she clapped her hand over her mouth as she caught the dark scowl from her teacher. Hermione apologised, sincerely, at once. "Oh god, I really am sorry, sir! Honestly! Please don't take anymore points from Slytherin."

He considered the desperate request shrewdly. "I shall not take another point from Slytherin if you are able to provide me with a plausible, and truthful, explanation as to why you are so reluctant to part with your books."

Hermione squirmed uneasily in her chair. What her teacher was asking for meant she would have to reveal some truths she'd really only felt comfortable telling to Draco and Harry. However, she didn't want to lose more points from Slytherin and get anyone from her House unduly mad at her.

With a resigned sigh, she replied, "My books are all I have, sir." Snape's scowl made no sign that he comprehended the statement that, to her, explained everything. Briefly closing her eyes, she clarified her declaration, "My books have always given me what I wanted, and couldn't have. My mum didn't understand, and she... she threw away quite a lot of my books until I learned to hide them so she'd never take them away again." Opening her gaze, she pleaded, contritely, "I know it doesn't make sense, sir, but my books are as much a part of me as breathing is. I just feel that if you take them from me for two weeks, I'm going to die!"

Snape was quiet a moment longer before declaring shortly, "Surely you are old enough to know that sounds simply ridiculous, Miss Granger." He frowned as she nodded in agreement miserably. "No one ever died from a lack of books." A little softer he said, "I do realise that books are very important you, child, but it is time you also realise that there are those, here, that regard you very highly, and consider you an important part of their lives. Books are not 'all that you have' anymore."

Hermione was quiet, expecting her teacher to say more, but then she thought that perhaps he expected her to say something. "You mean Harry and Draco, sir," she whispered.

"Most certainly," he nodded. "You also have the twins, Mr's Weasley, who think well of you, a good portion of your own House. There are

Lucius and Narcissa Malfoy who think well of you, and have high, and honorable expectations for you. Once a week Lucius either writes to me, or meets with me here, not only to see how his son is doing academically, but you, as well." He smiled slightly as Hermione herself smiled, just a bit. "Also, I do believe that you write rather lengthy letters to Narcissa, do you not."

Hermione giggled slightly, then blushed. "Aunt Cissy doesn't mind, does she? I mean, I know they're long, but it's so nice to write to her, about everything and I know she reads everything because she answers my questions."

"Considering that the witch has never stopped writing to you, I believe you need not ask such a question, Miss Granger." Hermione smiled. Snape rose from his desk chair and walked around the large desk where he moved in front of the girl and leaned his hip against the edge of his desk. "Now, I will not reduce, nor change your additional punishment from the Malfoys, Miss Granger. However, I will make this one concession; when you come to your study session before dinner, you may take two minutes to assure yourself that your books are fine. Is that acceptable?"

She nodded, letting out a breath of relief. "Yes, sir. Thank you."

"Get along to class, then, Miss Granger." He watched the girl leave and then he moved to the open office door and glared into the corridor where flickering shadows were created by the burning torches that lined the old stone walls. "Mr. Malfoy, Mr. Snape. Do show yourselves."

With matching hang-dog expressions, the two boys shuffled out from the darkness created by the shadows and allowed themselves to be ushered into the Potions Master's office. "Well?" he demanded.

"You hit Hermione," Harry accused in a flat voice.

"I did not hit her," began Snape.

"You did too!" Harry snapped just as several emotions burst from within: indignation, dismay, and an uncomfortable wavering of his trust.

"Mr. Snape, I have been shouted at once today," he growled out, doing his best to ignore the possible erosion of trust right before his eyes. "I will not tolerate it again."

Draco grasped the sleeve of Harry's uniform and yanked on it hard. "Har-ry!" he hissed in warning. Harry jerked his sleeve away from his friend, not allowing his gaze to be diverted from his father.

"You hit Hermione in front of everyone," the boy insisted firmly.

"It was a smack, Mr. Snape. I did it not to hurt Miss Granger, but to get her to attend to the fact that she was behaving like a spoilt toddler. That is quite a bit more than I intended to discuss with either of you as this was to be a private meeting between myself and my student." He regarded his two Snakes for a moment, then glanced pointedly out into the corridor through the still open door, and then back to the two boys. "Would you care to explain the reason for lurking outside my office?"

Draco was studying his clasped hands with feigned concentration. It was up to Harry to explain. Harry remained ramrod straight for almost a whole minute before he drooped slightly. Words poured out of his mouth at a phenomenal rate, then, "!"

Both Draco and Snape looked at Harry with puzzled expressions. Draco bit out, "What?"

Snape drawled, "Repeat yourself, Mr. Snape, slower this time."

Harry really didn't want to repeat himself. At first, there in the Great Hall in the aftermath of Hermione's public smack, he had thought it was the right thing to do; to go after them and make sure his friend would be all right. But then, halfway there, he had the sinking feeling that should his father really, and truly wish to hurt someone, he was an adult, and much more clever, and even dangerous, than most adults he knew. Harry was just a little kid who knew some magic (and some of it he wasn't all that good with), so what could he do to stop the Potions Master? But then, a part of him tried to reason with him that he was very wrong about the Dark Man. He would get mad, certainly, but he would never hurt a child. As reasonable as that sounded in his mind the smack Hermione received had stirred up old memories of similar, hurtful bum smacks from Aunt Petunia.

"I wanted to make sure... er... you didn't hurt Hermione." As an afterthought he lamely added, "Sir."

Snape made to reach for his son's chin, but was dismayed when the boy twitched slightly backwards. The effort, on Harry's part, to stay in place was all too visible.

What have I done? Why does my son flinch away as though I am about to hit him for worrying about his friend? What did I do that made Harry think I was going to hurt Hermione?

Snape sat down in the chair Hermione had recently vacated and regarded his son. Hurt by his sons fears glistened briefly in the depths of his dark eyes.

Harry saw that and he began to babble, "I'm sorry, sir! I shouldn't have thought that! I know you're good! Dark Man you saved me from so many terrible nightmares when I was little and you've never smacked me once since I got here! I just... just... I... didn't..." Harry's babbling ran out of steam and since he didn't know what to do, he settled for chewing upon his lower lip and curling his fists into his robes.

"Come here, child," Snape motioned with his hands for Harry to step closer. It was heartening to him that Harry did not hesitate and this time, when his father reached for his hands, Harry released his grip on his robes and the boy allowed his father to fold his large hands over the smaller ones. "You remembered something from your time with your relatives when I smacked your friend, didn't you?" he asked with accurate insight. Harry nodded quickly. "Will you tell me what it was?"

"When I was eight my Uncle Vernon was having some work done on the house so my Aunt Petunia didn't have any choice but to take me with her and Dudley. We went to the zoo." He smiled at the more pleasant aspect of the memory from his past. "It was really wicked getting to see all these great animals, but then Dudley got hungry and he wanted an ice cream. Of course, Aunt Petunia bought him one, but not for me. And, well, I just really, really wanted one and I asked as polite as I could. I really did. And, and then she grabbed my arm and walloped my bum a bunch of times." Harry's fingers shifted and he convulsively gripped the older man's hands. "Honest,

sir, I wasn't being smarty mouthed or anything! I was being the most polite I could 'cuz I really wanted an ice cream!"

"Shh! Calm down, Harry," soothed Snape. He took a handkerchief from his pocket and used his wand to dampen it slightly with cool water. He dabbed the cool cloth over Harry's flushed cheeks, chin, and neck. "Better?"

"Uh huh," nodded Harry.

Draco moved to stand beside his Head of House as he eyed his friend. "Did you go away in the past again, Harry?" he asked with concern.

"Yeah. Yeah, I think I sort of did," he affirmed. His dark green gaze caught the dark orbs of his father's. "I really do know you wouldn't've hurt Hermione, Dad. It was just weird in the Great Hall..." he shrugged in resignation.

"I understand, son." He drew Harry to himself and gave him a quick hug. "You are going to have these odd flashbacks from time to time, but we will deal with them."

"I'll help, too!" piped up Draco. Harry smiled at his best friend.

The Slytherin Prefect, Tara Anglaise, slung her bookbag quickly over one shoulder and made her way down from the Transfiguration class to the dungeon office of her Head of House. She had a few minutes before any of his evening detentions began and she hoped that was all she needed. When she arrived, the door was open, and Snape was already at his desk grading essays or tests. She knocked lightly.

"Enter," he spoke solemnly and glanced up to see the seventh year prefect. "Miss Anglaise? What may I do for you?"

Tara pulled the letter from her pocket that was a tad bent from having spent the day there. She held it out to him and he took it. "That was at Hermione's place this morning at breakfast, sir. I guess she didn't get a chance to read it."

"No," he smirked. "I believe Miss Granger had her mind on a few other things." He then nodded and glanced down at the address on

the envelope. "Why did you not deliver this directly to Miss Granger?"

Tara hesitated, but only for the briefest of seconds. "It's from her parents, sir."

"So it is," he drawled, wondering why the girl was stating the obvious.

"Well... Hermione's never gotten anything from her parents, sir. Flint was teasing her about that one night. You know how his mother writes him about the least little thing, right?" Snape drew in a breath and nodded for the young lady to continue. Everyone knew that as nasty as Marcus Flint could be, down underneath all that bluster he was the worst momma's boy anyone had ever met. "Anyway, everyone was talking about the Malfoys Winter Ball that night and Draco happened to ask Hermione if she had heard back from her parents, yet, on whether or not she would get to go. Hermione tried to ignore him and finally snapped that she couldn't go and for him to 'quit nagging' her about it. That's where Flint jumped in and said something about how she ought to do whatever she wanted since it was obvious that her parents didn't care about her."

"And Miss Granger's reaction?" he asked smoothly.

"She cried," Tara grimaced at the memory. "A lot. I almost sent someone for you, but Hermione did rally her emotions and settle down. I then had to talk to Draco and I asked him not to mention the Ball to her for awhile. At least, not until I got her to write to her Sponsors about the problem." She glanced at the letter. "I didn't give that to Hermione, sir, because I was a little worried that if it wasn't good news, it wouldn't do her any good to hear it."

"I think you did well, Miss Anglaise. I shall deal with the letter. Thank you for bringing it to me."

"You're welcome, sir." She then turned and left the office.

With a wave of his wand, Snape closed his office door and locked it. He turned the letter from the Grangers over and over in his hand. It had been mailed the Muggle way to the Hogsmeade Post Owl Office. From there it had been delivered to Hogwarts for Hermione. The letter was just a week old.

Flipping it over to the backside, he used his thumbnail to part the closing flap from the envelope and was promptly awarded a papercut that sliced across his thumb pad and cuticle. Cursing the Muggle envelope, Snape Summoned a disinfectant and then healed the cut using his wand and a simple Healing Charm. With that small annoyance fixed, he removed the letter, unfolded the flower-edged, cheap stationary, and began to read.

Hermione Jean Granger,

We have had it up to here with all the owls that are coming from your world, and that school. You must inform anyone that has written us that it needs to stop, this instant.

George and I have been talking earnestly this last month and we have made a difficult decision; in light of you being adopted, or sponsored, or whatever that wizard thing is, we are washing our hands of you. Frankly, you've been nothing but a bitter disappointment since your birth. No interest in your future, no interest in the things that matter to us. How many times have I told you that you were destined for something greater and you just never listened! Contrary, disobedient child!

We tried to live with your magical abberation but to be blunt, George is plainly terrified of you. I suppose you don't care that when you received that letter from Hogwarts, his nerves made him quite ill. It only made him worse when we had to take you that absolutely insane road for school supplies. George really hasn't been the same since. Especially since you've apparently gone and got adopted. This is the last straw. I am utterly shocked that we weren't even consulted, but I guess that's how things work there!

What this comes down to is that George and I are heartbroken at the loss of the daughter we thought we had. Everything we gave you and you just threw it back in our faces like so much trash. Now you're somehow superior to us, I guess, because you can wave a silly wand around and we can't.

You have your world and it is best that you forget about ours. The magic you did here was too much for any sane human being to deal with, and I rather consider it dangerous, too. With the plans we've made it is far too big a risk for you to return. You're obviously one of them and you should remain with them.

George has packed up your things and you should receive them about a day or two after you get this letter.

Dr. Jean Granger

In a smaller, more precise print there was a postscript to the letter after Hermione's mother's signature.

Hermione, there were many times I took your side against your mother (mother was firmly scratched out in someone else's hand) Jean and I am afraid I cannot do so any longer. It is better that you live with your own sort. I'm sure you'll be happier, and this time I think Jean will have the daughter I should have given her. I've enclosed a photograph of Araminta. She is five and is quite the young lady. Jean is delighted with her.

Dr. George Granger

Very slowly Snape put down the letter and refrained from instantly burning it to ash. He picked up the envelope, turned it upside-down, and out fell a small, Muggle photograph of a very pretty, five-year old girl. Her smile was perfect, as were her perfectly styled, golden curls, and her dress of pink and yellow, lace and silk that Snape doubted Hermione had never seen in her own closet.

Snape laid the photo on top of the letter and ground his teeth together as his blood boiled hotly in his veins.

Never in his life had he ever read something so cold, so insulting, so cruel, before. It was a rambling mess of a missive, but its intent was a truly aimed arrow – had Hermione read it, her heart would have been cleaved in two. His poor little know-it-all Snake might have been the first, ever, to expire from a broken heart.

"You two and the Dursleys are the worst sort of Muggles... of human beings," he growled tightly under his breath. Around his office bottles and jars began to rattle ominously. Not heeding the rise of his magic, Snape slammed his fists onto the surface of his desk. An angry aura of red burst forth from his fists at the impact, and exploded. At the same moment, several dozen jars popped, burst, or shattered.



The possibility of potions mixing that shouldn't was enough to shut down the Potions Master's anger. He folded the letter, with the photograph, and tucked it into an inner pocket. He then removed his wand, vanished the mess from his walls and floors, including the glass, and swept out of his office.

Just a few steps away was his classroom where a group of Ravenclaw and Hufflepuff thirds years waited for their teacher, who was curiously late by at least fifteen minutes.

Snape burst into the classroom, causing almost all of the students to flinch, jump, or let out startled squeaks. "Read chapters 14 and 15 of your textbook and then write a 2 foot essay on the properties of Hippogriff Talon."

Not one student made a move. In fact, they rather stared a bit dumbly stunned at him. "Well? Get to your dorms and get started! Class dismissed!" He shouted.

That stirred the students into action, and in under a minute, the classroom was cleared. Snape slammed the door shut behind them, plucked a jar of dried cockroaches off of a nearby shelf, and threw it with all his strength across the room until it shattered on the far wall.

"Bastards!"

That evening, Snape did not speak to Hermione of the letter from her parents, but he did invite Harry, Draco, Hermione, the Twins, Neville, and Millicent to dine with him in his office. He was mostly quiet during the sumptuous meal. Around him the children babbled, argued, discussed classes, and the upcoming holidays.

Oddly, not once did he find any of them annoying.

Monday, Nov. 11, 1991 – A few strokes before midnight, Hogwarts Infirmary

Quirinus Quirrell was not a warrior. He never had been. A weak and easy to frighten man, he had once believed in the enigmatic Lord Voldemort and his message of preserving Pureblood wizardry by the complete separation of Muggles from the wizarding world. He had served his Dark Lord by traveling the world in search of spells and rituals that would ensure his Master a long life; a life that might even

stretch beyond death. He had never taken the Dark Mark, but his soul had been Marked long before then.

Upon his Master's death at the chubby hands of an infant, he had hoped to escape the Dark Lord forever by traveling to the ends of the Earth. He had not known that one of those very spells that he had acquired for his Master had been used to hobble him mentally, and to prepare him for the eventual destruction Lord Voldemort had expected from a Prophecy.

The Dark Lord had used a subtle spell and a very arcane potion to weave a portion of his own soul around that of Quirrell's. Quirinus had not known of this for he had been under the soporific haze of that potion. He had dreamed such horrific things, things that repulsed him deeply, but were oddly overlaid by by a sensuous thrill that had later sickened him. Those strange visions had faded and he had awakened in his own bed in the little cottage his aunt had given him along the coast of Cornwall.

Ignorant as he was then, Quirinus was no longer. Magically weak, and infinitely terrified, he knew that it was impossible for him to oppose his parasitic Master.

How the girl had gotten the Stone, Quirinus could not say, but its song swept tantalisingly through his head, night and day, calling for someone with the power to tame it.

As he himself had been injured by the odd Light of white power that had assaulted his mind, and his magical core, so too had the Dark Lord suffered. All the strength Voldemort had siphoned from the unicorns and the Centaurs had drifted away like ash. It was the song of the Stone, and only its allure that kept the Dark Lord fighting to keep a hold upon his vessel that was Quirinus Quirrell. Any hope that the poor Defense Against the Dark Arts teacher had of just simply dying and being released of his evil burden, had faded when the Dark Lord learned of the Stone's presence.

Within his mind, a disgustingly cold cheek laid itself against his own. His Master's voice crooned gently to him. "We are nearly sssstrong again, my Ssssacred Vessel. Ssstay here besssside me, dear Quirinussss. You will awaken. You will live and we shall gain the life and the power we dessssire."

If he had been able to, Quirinus would have wept.

A/N: I hope you enjoyed the meeting between Harry and Remus. What do you think of what's going on with Quirrell? And, the Philosopher's Stone? It's little mystery will be answered, soon.

Hermione's parents are just horrid, aren't they? If you think Snape was mad, Lucius and Narcissa aren't going to be too happy.

Enjoy and thank you for continuing to read.

1000th reviewer was acelly. Acelly, I sent you an email, but have not heard back from you in regards to a few questions I had for your story. Please PM me. Thank you. :)

Friday, Nov. 15, 1991

Ron Weasley rested his chin upon his hand as he sat at his mother's long, kitchen table, hunched over his latest essay. For the last five minutes he had been idly tapping his quill's feather against the parchment and unwittingly causing tiny splashes of ink to add to the freckles on his nose and cheeks.

The eleven year old red-head was getting awfully tired of essays. Maybe if they had been on Charms, Transfiguration, or even stupid Potions, he might not have minded them so much, but all of his essays had been on things like manners, good behavior, morals.

At the beginning of his suspension from Hogwarts, he'd begun with the worst bum-stinging spanking he'd ever had in his life. His mum, who usually spanked the kids (mainly because she didn't have a heavy hand) had turned the job over to Ron's father, Arthur Weasley.

Arthur Weasley had always considered himself a soft-hearted man when it came to raising his children, and never had he had to spank any of them. He'd be the one to give the lecture, and Molly would do the spanking, which was often quick, and only stung for a few minutes. This time Arthur and Molly both lectured their youngest son. To say they were disappointed in his behavior, how he had treated the young Granger girl, and how he had done nothing to prevent the final insult, would be an understatement. After the lecture from his parents, Ron was in near hysterical tears as he had been scared that his parents might ship him off to Iceland, or sell him to slavers. Oddly, as much as the spanking from his father had made him think his bum would burn with fire for days on end, it had assured Ron that despite everything, he was still wanted by his parents.

Thus began the essays. Endless writing that made the young boy dig deep into his own psyche where he had no choice but to discover how terrible what he had done to Hermione had been. He'd never admit it to anyone, not even any of his older brothers, but over the intervening weeks of essays, Ron had even wept a few times over what his words made him look into.

Ron now knew, not just in principle how bad it was what he'd done to Hermione, but he knew it deep down in his soul. He knew he just went along with the other boys because he so much wanted to be a part of those guys he thought were the popular ones. He had felt

bad doing what he did, but Seamus and Dean were so good about talking him out of those feelings that he was soon squashing them down so he didn't have to listen to them.

Now, with the end of his suspension looming on the horizon, Ron's thoughts were still partly on Hermione Granger and whether or not she would forgive him (if she didn't, it would be all right with him) and whether or not he could face the other Gryffindors. To be honest, Ron was a bit afraid about going back to school. What if everyone hated him.

"Ronnie dear!" called his mother from upstairs. Molly was in her "fix-it" room which had once belonged to Bill when he was growing up. Molly did all her knitting and fixing and patching of clothing, blankets, and other such stuff that kept her family comfortable.

Ron looked up from his essay. "What is it, mum?" he shouted.

Cherry-cheeked Molly Weasley came down the stairs that coiled up to the topmost tower of the Burrow waving a letter in her hand. Ron stared at it glumly.

"Oh honey! Don't look that way," grinned Molly. "It isn't from Percy." Rule-Book Prefect Percy had written once a week spouting off his two knuts and Ron was sick of it. His parents were no help since they both thought Percy's scolding was spot on. Molly patted her youngest son. "This letter is from one of your dorm mates."

Ron didn't think it was Dean. Ron found out a few days after his suspension that Dean had been sent to live with an aunt and uncle in Wales where he would be taught the trade of a Muggle carpenter. Dean would not be allowed to use his magic again until he reached his majority, whereupon he would go to the Ministry who would determine whether or not he would ever get to use his magic again.

Then Ron wondered if it was Seamus, but he doubted it. Seamus was also gone from England. His parents had taken him back to Ireland and there were rumours that he would end up going to one of the small magical schools there instead of coming back to Hogwarts.

Molly handed the letter to her son. "It's from Augustus Longbottom's boy, Neville." She watched as Ron turned the envelope over in his

hands. He gave it a puzzled look. Hands on her ample hips, Molly frowned at him. "You'd do well to make friends with Neville, Ronnie. He's a very nice boy."

"How come he's writing to me?" asked Ron.

"Why don't you read the letter and find out, dear. I'll get lunch made." Molly bustled away while her son broke the seal and opened the letter. He read it.

Hi Ron,

Fred and George thought I ought to write to you. They said you're pretty lonely and it doesn't help when your git of a brother, Percy, keeps writing to you.

Ron giggled at the name calling, and kept reading.

I bet you didn't know I've had our dorm all to myself. Well, almost. Fred and George visit a lot, and so do Lavender Brown and Parvati Patil. They're always talking about fashion, or make-up, girl stuff you know, but they're pretty nice, too. Lavender has a really good sense of humour and she doesn't get too terribly grossed out by stuff. Especially in Potions. Parvati has gotten queasy, but when we were working with Abyssinian Snails, she fainted. Well, I guess that wasn't funny. It was really sort of scary cause she hit her head when she fainted and boy was there a lot of blood. Professor Snape was really good, though. Everyone sort of went a bit nuts and he calmed everyone down so he help could Parvati. We learned that scalp wounds really bleed a lot. We also learned that Abyssinian Snails are really long, slimy and they're so gross that it's not really smart to eat spaghetti after pulling them out of their shells.

(Below this paragraph Neville had provided a rather accurate sketch of someone's be-slimed hand pulling a very long snail from its shell. The sketch had been jerkily animated. Ron grimaced at the drawing, but chuckled.)

Lavender was hoping that maybe Parvati wouldn't have to take Potions anymore, but no such luck. I think she'll be all right, though. Professor Snape keeps an eye on her and if he thinks Parvati's getting kind of sick looking, then he makes her go stand in front of the open, Enchanted Window for a few minutes.

Professor Snape is still snarky, and he can be a right git, too, but he really just wants us to do our best and if we really try, he's a bit... well, I guess you could call it nice. Or less gitty? He still takes a lot of points from Gryffindor, and none from Slytherin, so there's still a lot of people who just plain don't like him.

Remember how terrible I used to be in Potions? Since I don't have dorm mates, Professor McGonagall let me study with Hermione, Harry, Draco, Millicent, and your brothers, Fred and George. It's really kind of fun. Professor Snape gave us our own study room right in his office, and sometimes, if he doesn't have work to do, he's even let us into his private lab to practice brewing. That means I'm doing a lot better and I haven't blown up or melted any cauldrons in a long time! Professor Snape's got better patience, too, then.

Ron sneered, "Yeah, right. And you didn't say if Fred and George like him. I bet their just waiting for the right moment to prank that slimy, old, bat."

"What did you say, Ronald Bilius Weasley?" called Molly from the kitchen.

"Nothing, Mum." Ron went back to his letter.

Fred and George are really neat. They are sort of like our teachers in our study room. They're a lot of fun, but they're serious, too. They explain a lot of things that just roll around in my head not making any sense. I bet they'd be good teachers someday.

Oh yeah, they still play pranks, too.

Awhile back there were some terrible pranks that were being played on the Slytherins that started just after Halloween. The first one happened at breakfast and Draco bit into a piece of candy that blew out his front tooth. Madame Pomfrey put it back, so it's okay now. Other pranks were all the Slytherin practice brooms being turned into chocolate. Millicent Bulstrode actually managed to fly one, for a bit, but it wasn't really good cause the broom melted and she fell through the air a few feet and really broke her leg badly. Madame Pomfrey is afraid she's going to limp all her life now on her left leg. It's not too bad a limp and she can still run pretty good, too.

Well, anyway, Professor McGonagall had the twins ferret out who the prankster was and you'll never guess but it was Dean Thomas' cousin!

Bet you didn't even know he had a cousin, did you? I didn't either. But Algernon Torrance is Dean's cousin, his mother's brother's son. He's about three years older than Dean and he's a right piece of work. Seems he's gotten detentions over the last three years from every teacher for nasty pranks, but none like the really dangerous ones he's been doing. Algernon's mad that Dean was expelled and can't practice magic until he's seventeen, so he decided to hurt as many Slytherins as he could until he was caught.

We heard some rumours that Algernon was only going to get suspended, but Millicent's dad came to Hogwarts. He's a really big man. Ugly, too. And scary. I think he even scared Professor Dumbledore. Anyway, he said he wasn't going to put up with someone permanently laming his little girl and before Dumbledore could do anything Mr. Bulstrode called the Aurors and Algernon was taken away. Have you seen the Daily Prophet? On Wednesday there was a whole big article about the incident.

"Mum!" Ron's head snapped up from the long, and very interesting letter from Neville. "Do we have Wednesday's newspaper?"

"Yes, we do, dear." Molly levitated a big sandwich and a bowl of soup over to her son, and then Summoned the newspaper from a wooden bin next to Arthur's chair in the living room.

Ron bit into his sandwich as he spread out the three days old paper and looked for the story. It was on the second page and he quickly read. Most of what was reported repeated what Ron had read in Neville's letter. In addition he read that Goren Bulstrode along with Lucius Malfoy, Theodore Nott, and Gwendolyn Zabini were all bringing criminal charges against Algernon Torrance for injuries his devilish pranks caused to their children. Ron further read that Theodore Nott the younger had lost all of his hair for two days, and Blaise Zabini's fingers had been turned backwards. That wasn't permanent, but to reverse the prank had caused the boy a lot of pain and he was still in the Infirmary recovering.

Ron had grimaced at that last prank and as much as he used to think all Slytherins were bad, not even they deserved something like



that. He then learned that Algernon wasn't a Gryffindor, but a Ravenclaw boy.

Ron pushed aside the paper and ate his lunch in silence. It gnawed at him that what he and Dean, and Seamus had done to Hermione had led to something so awful as this. With a little less enthusiasm then before, Ron picked up Neville's letter, found where he had left off in his reading, and finished.

The rest of the week has been kind of quiet except there are a lot of people talking about the Winter Ball that the Malfoys hold before Christmas every year. My gran is going, so, since I'm old enough for most of it, I have to go, too. Gran was going to send me to Madame Malkin's for dress robes, but she must have talked to Mrs. Malfoy so now we're all going to Malfoy Manor to be measured for new dress robes by some witch who is coming from Paris. Gran wrote to me and told me I'd better be a perfect gentlemen, or else! I don't even know when we're going to do this!

Do you know if you're going? Draco says that just about everybody in the wizarding world is invited. It's supposed to be a big charity event, too, but I overheard some of the Gryff's saying that it's just an excuse for a bunch of Purebloods to get together and hatch plots to bring back You-Know-Who.

I don't know about that. I know there's still some bad witches and wizards out there, and maybe some not so nice people will show up at the ball, but I really do think the Malfoys are good people. I didn't know until this year until my Gran said I was old enough to know, but the Malfoys have been helping to pay for my parents care almost since they were tortured by that evil witch Bellatrix Lestrange. You just really don't know some people, do you?

Well, it's getting late and I want to send this off in the morning. Would you write me back, Ron? We didn't get to be much in the way of friends, but if you're anything like Fred and George then I don't think you're really a bad person.

Bye.

Your friend and fellow Gryffindor,

Neville

Ron had finished all of his lunch, and although he was eager to reply to Neville's letter, Molly bustled him about the Burrow doing chores until it was time for dinner. After dinner he had more of his essay to do plus read a chapter in his Transfiguration book. Ron's parents, although not skilled in all subjects taught at Hogwarts, were doing their best to make sure their son wouldn't be too far behind when he returned to school.

With his essay and reading complete, Ron practically fell into his bed. He was fast asleep in minutes and it would be at least a week before he could reply to Neville. After that, they kept up a warm correspondence in which Ron was better assured that he would have a not so bad welcome when he went back to school.

Saturday, Nov. 16, 1991

As Snape was stepping gracefully from the Floo into the parlor of the Malfoy Manor, Hermione was opening a memo from her Head of House that popped into view just as she finished breakfast. In the short note, Snape instructed the girl to report to Madame Pomfrey for her all day detention as he explained that he had a prior engagement. The girl departed from her friends and made her way to the Infirmary. Harry and Draco went to do a token amount of homework before setting off to do some castle exploring.

Snape Scourgified the soot away from his robes and then greeted Narcissa and Lucius who were prepared for their day in the Muggle world by already having donned Muggle style clothing.

Lucius wore a simple, but elegant Muggle suit of dark grey wool, a white linen shirt with a Muggle silk tie of deep emerald. Narcissa wore a fashionable Muggle suit that was burgundy linen. It consisted of a skirt that was just below the knees, a smart jacket over a peach silk blouse, and a simple strand of pearls. Narcissa, who had always worn long dresses, was not doing a very good job of hiding her discomfort in the Muggle outfit that she had been informed by Lucius' Muggle solicitor as being 'modest'. As for Lucius, he was doing a poor job of NOT looking at his beloved wife's legs.

Snape, who was in no mood to stand witness to the Malfoys flirtations, took the letter out of his inner pocket that his prefect, Tara

Anglaise had given to him at the beginning of the week. He handed it to Lucius.

"This is a letter that was delivered to Miss Granger on Monday. Circumstances, fortunately, prevented the girl from reading it," said Snape.

Lucius frowned at the address, "The Grangers? Surely Hermione would want to hear from her parents, Severus."

"I think not," he sneered mildly. He nodded once to indicate that his friend ought to read the letter. He stopped, though, before handing it over, held it up, and scowled. "Lucius, you wrote to me that the Grangers were supposed to visit for Christmas."

Lucius shook his head. "I had invited them after Hermione expressed a desire to stay with us over Christmas. Narcissa sent them an invitation for which we have never received a reply to."

Snape nodded, "Ah. This makes, perhaps, a bit more sense." He handed the letter over to his friend. He frowned again. "Or, maybe it does not."

Lucius opened the letter and began to read it. With each sentence, each insult towards Hermione, his lips thinned tightly until they were almost bloodless. When he was finished, Narcissa took the letter from her husband and she began to read.

While Narcissa read the letter, Snape regarded the patrician wizard. He appeared calm, collected, but knowing body language as he did, Snape was able to see a tic in the jaw, the un-blooded lips, a harshness around the grey eyes. The Potions Master had no doubt that if the Grangers appeared right then there would be nothing left for the house elves to clean up.

Finally, Narcissa was finished with the letter. She walked over to the fireplace and held it over the flames, watching as its edges began to curl. Suddenly the letter zipped out of her hand and into Snape's.

"I'm sorry, Narcissa, but it is best to hold onto this as proof," explained Snape.

The patrician witch simply nodded, walked over to Lucius, and lightly grazed his shoulder with her fingertips. "As much as you are tempted, my dear, do remember that more may be done for Hermione if we stay out of Azkaban than if we are in it."

Lucius gave his wife's hand a gentle squeeze as he rose to his feet. He walked out of the parlor, summoning a black wool coat that dropped to his knees, and called out, "Shall we be going, then?"

Snape motioned Narcissa to go ahead of him, but she turned to face him. "And you, Severus. Don't forget your responsibilities to Harry and your Snakes."

He inclined his head in acknowledgment and then followed the witch from Malfoy Manor to the Apparition point.

Dr. George Granger should have been working in his dentistry office at that time of the day, but instead he was at home seated on the stripped bed that was still in the room of the child that had been his first daughter.

The pale pink and white striped wallpaper was still in place, but that would be replaced in a day or two with something Araminta liked. The room, once filled with plaques, certificates, and even a trophy or two that had reflected Hermione's accomplishments in ballet, modern dance, etiquette class, and others George couldn't think of, were gone. Jean hadn't allowed those to be packed. They had gone out in the trash bins. Hermione had once shown her father a small trophy she had gotten for winning a spelling bee, but Jean hadn't allowed it to sit with the others. He wondered if there had been other such scholarly awards. Hermione's grades in Primary had always been perfect, but Jean hadn't liked that. A girl shouldn't be so smart. What if she intimidated a boy that was important to her future?

George tried to see if he could recall the birth of his daughter, but the truth was, he had gone to a convention on new dental techniques that was more memorable. What he did remember was that it had been difficult for Jean and she had never really stopped blaming him for that. At least his wife had never said another word about that night. Hermione, though, could count on a terribly graphic lecture whenever the girl seemed ungrateful for what her parents provided her. It was one of many lectures George learned to tune out over the years.

George should have known that what he had expected for family life was not to be when Jean hired a wet nurse, and then a nanny. When Hermione was eight they had to let the nanny go because they couldn't afford her and the many classes that Jean wanted Hermione to take.

Of course, family life for the Grangers was off kilter the first time George picked up his little baby girl to hug her to him, as any father would, Jean hurt Hermione by wrenching her from him, giving the wailing baby to the wet nurse, and then yelling at him for being a potential pedophile!

He never thought of Hermione in 'that way'. God no! She was his little girl, was she not?

No. She never was. Jean made sure of that.

George had to be content to watch his only child growing up beneath her mother's direction. He had no part in it. Hermione learned very quickly that 'father' could not help her, in anything. It wasn't unusual for days, nay weeks to go before Hermione would think to look upon her father.

George didn't wonder if Hermione loved him, he wondered if she even had ever liked him.

The day that George thought he would overrule Jean's iron hand over their family and household unfortunately happened to be the day, at age six, when Hermione showed the first sign of not being what she should have been; human. George had come home early with the intention of talking to his child, to ask her, for once, about her day. He wanted to learn about her, to open the door to being a good father for her. Instead, he had walked into Hermione's room to find all of her stuffed toys dancing around her. She was in the middle, ecstatic, dancing, too.

George had closed the door before Hermione knew he was there, and he never tried again.

The dentist now sat in his old daughter's empty bedroom as he sought some emotion that might redeem him, but there was none. He did not feel regret over his actions because he had made his

choices, for good or ill, and he was enough of a practical man to know he didn't deserve Hermione. Love? No. That wasn't to be found either for the simple fact that any paternal feelings he once may have harbored vanished when the bouts of accidental magic came. Hermione's oddity unnerved him. By the time she was eleven and the fateful letter from Hogwarts came, it only served to nail the coffin shut on anything but the fear he felt for his own child.

Yes. George Granger feared his own daughter. She was a witch.

In an odd way, it had been a relief, knowing the child would be in that wizarding world. He would not have to deal with the strangeness in Hermione, and he and Jean would return to simpler times.

Almost, but not quite. There had been that wretched trip to Diagon Alley. It had ripped at George's nerves, all the magic he had seen that day. Even Jean, usually a very vocal sort of woman, had been cowed at the magic and odd sights of that place. Once they were home, Jean had locked Hermione in her bedroom and had warned her she wouldn't be allowed to leave until she was to be gone from them to Hogwarts. George had retreated to his study and did not emerge for two days whereupon Jean sent him to a doctor for some pills to steady his nerves.

Sitting in the last place Hermione had occupied until September the first, it had never occurred to George that not once had he ever heard Hermione begging to be let out of her room.

George had convinced himself that since Hermione made no protest, and that she was allowed out to use the facilities several times a day and fed three meals, it hadn't been a cruel thing that Jean had done. It was a failing on his part, that even now with all sign of the child he had once fathered removed from the house, that he still agreed with what Jean had done.

When the day came that Hermione was to leave, Jean let the child out of her room for her bathroom ablutions and made sure that Hermione had packed everything. A taxi had been called and once she was out the door, it was up to her to make sure she found the train she was to ride.

Jean immediately tried to settle into a life without Hermione. She had been a bitter and angry woman, though, at having lost the daughter she thought she had. It had hurt, perhaps, even more when George's mother, Abbeline Truitt had written to invite mother and daughter to a very important tea that would finally have introduced Jean, and Hermione, to the society Jean had always felt was her due to be a part of.

Jean had written scores of letters to Abbeline about Hermione and what she was doing to make her mother proud, how her little girl was being brought up to be a proper lady.

George had no idea what Jean had finally written to Abbeline, but afterwards Jean had not spoken to him for nearly a week.

Lost in these ruminations, George never heard his wife come home from one of the many shopping trips she had been taking Araminta on so Jean's voice shouting at him from the first floor startled his now tender nerves. It took him a moment to gather himself, but when he did, he left the empty bedroom and went down the stairs to greet his wife. George hardly expected to see three strangers in his living room, two men and a woman, glaring at him.

Snape, Lucius, and Narcissa had Apparated to the backyard of a house that was empty, and for sale in the same neighborhood where the Grangers lived. Snape quickly Transfigured his clothing into a simple black wool suit, white cotton shirt, black boots, and a long Winter coat that was similar to the one Lucius wore.

It had begun to snow and swirls of cutting wind threw the snowflakes around them, lashing at exposed cheeks, and in Narcissa's case, at exposed legs. At her complaint, Lucius quickly cast a Warming Charm and then teased his wife.

"Perhaps you should have gone with the trousers, dear," he smiled wickedly. Narcissa had to try on several outfits and Lucius had quite liked the tailored trousers upon Narcissa. Daring though the clothing was, the trousers were fetching on his wife's slim frame.

Narcissa gave her husband a dark scowl. "Women... ladies do not wear trousers, Lucius," she clipped. "Men do." She then eyed Lucius shrewdly as her gently caught his wife as her heel slipped on the slick sidewalk. "You liked those, didn't you?"

Lucius answered carefully, "They're certainly not the fashion for today's witch, but I can see why Muggle men find them appealing on ladies, my dear." Narcissa, who intended to tell her husband just how tasteless the clothing was never said what was on her mind when she caught the smoldering fire of lust in his eyes. She slipped again, although it was on purpose since Snape had cast a silent spell to prevent them from falling, right into Lucius' arms.

Snape suddenly found his path on the narrow sidewalk blocked by the married couple embracing and looking into each other's eyes. He was very tempted to cast an Augamenti Charm upon the two, but there were a group of children playing nearby in front of one of the houses.

"Do you mind?" growled out Snape.

Narcissa broke away from Lucius with a quick laugh. Lucius just smirked and got their little procession moving again. Narcissa dropped away from her husband's side to walk beside Snape. She slipped her hand into the crook of his elbow.

"You really ought to find a mother for Harry, Severus," she teased lightly. "The Winter Ball will find many suitable young ladies whom I have no doubt would be eager to have a studious Potions Master for a husband."

Snape brushed off the slightly older woman's hand from his arm. He glared, "I am in no immediate need of a wife, Narcissa, and I will thank you to cease acting like my mother!" He strode ahead and pushed so firmly past Lucius that he knocked the older man into a snowdrift that had been made by someone having shoveled snow from the walk onto the yard earlier in the week.

Lucius was helped up by Narcissa whose expression showed a little worry, and a bit of hurt at Snape's reaction to her teasing. "I was only teasing, Lucius," she said softly.

Her husband lightly kissed her cheek, and drew her to his side as they continued after the irate wizard. "Never you mind, Cissy, my dear. Our friend will realise sooner or later that he is in need of a wife and we shall both be there to assist him in his choice."



"It will take a remarkable woman, with a fortitude of spirit, to love that man," declared Narcissa.

"Indeed, my dear. A remarkable woman indeed!"

All three magical folk stopped upon the sidewalk to eye the small, two-story house. A white, picket fence surrounded the yard and rose bushes protected against the chill of Winter slept beneath green bags as they nestled against the unimposing, brick house. Smoke curled up from a chimney.

"It looks cramped," murmured Narcissa softly.

"After Malfoy Manor and Hogwarts Castle, I would think most Muggle places would appear a bit cramped," remarked Snape. He didn't mention the small house of his Muggle father's that he had grown up in. It had been smaller than the Granger home.

Snape stepped onto the freshly shoveled walk to the front door and knocked firmly. The door was opened by the perfect little girl from the photograph. She smiled shyly at the three strangers, for a mere second. A shout from the kitchen, "Araminta Louise Granger! I told you not to answer that door!" had the small child darting away.

Jean Granger emerged from the kitchen. She was a remarkably tall woman, nearly as tall as Snape and Lucius were. Her hair was brown, like her daughter's, but more of a mousey colour with strands of greying brown in it that dulled the hair. It appeared to have been aggressively styled so if Jean Granger was the progenitor of Hermione's bushy locks, one did not see them on Jean.

Jean Granger was slim and wore a pale green, cashmere sweater over rather smart looking beige trousers. She was just in thick socks, and Snape glanced quickly down by the door to see three pairs of boots, one pair the right size for a small girl.

"May I help you?" Jean Granger asked as she looked over her visitors. She wondered if they had come from the local church. They appeared to be dressed that way. Or maybe they were officials of some sort. The dark haired one looked more like a government employee than the other two did.

"Might we come in, Mrs. Granger?" asked Snape politely, though he didn't feel like he wanted to be so polite to this woman. "Our business concerns your daughter."

Jean Granger frowned, and sharply glanced at the little girl. "Araminta, go to the study." When the child hesitated, Jean Granger snapped, "Now!" The child ran like a frightened doe out of the living room, and down a short hall. A door slammed shut.

"Is this about Hermione?" Jean Granger asked with a perturbed scowl.

"It is," nodded Snape. "I am one of her teachers from Hogwarts. May we come in?"

Jean Granger ushered the two wizards, and the witch into the living room, then stalked to the bottom of the stairs and shouted up them. "George! I know you're up there! Come down this instant!" Jean Granger then turned and crossed her arms over her chest as she glared at the three unnaturals that were unwelcome in her home.

A few minutes later, George Granger came down the stairs. He paused almost two thirds down to stare at their curious guests. While George Granger stared, Snape took measure of the man.

George Granger was a soft looking man who had been a more athletic sort in his youth. He was hardly fat, but he had put on some weight since his younger years. His hair, it seemed, was the culprit that gave Hermione such bushy hair. Her father's hair was corkscrew curls of dark brown that had been trimmed close to his head. Upon his round face were a pair of horn-rimmed spectacles that gave him a slightly owlsh appearance. He wore an often worn beige cardigan of some artificial yarn over a simple white shirt, and trousers that were slightly wrinkled and in need of being replaced. On his feet were a pair of leather slippers.

"Who are they, dear?" asked George as he descended the last of the stairs. Everyone was then able to see that George Granger stood at least a foot shorter than his wife.

"They're from Hermione's school," she snapped. "They're her kind."

Although they had yet to be invited to sit down, Snape continued his polite manner. "I am Severus Snape, and these are Lucius Malfoy and his wife, Narcissa. They are the kind couple who chose to Sponsor your daughter."

Jean scowled at the Malfoys and snapped, "So you're the ones. I don't know why you did it. If you're expecting some sort of compensation, or thanks from us, you'll not be getting it."

Narcissa Malfoy's eyes sparked dangerously at the insult. Lucius Malfoy ignored it as he watched with some incredulity as the supposed man of the house walked into the living room, sat down in a recliner, put his feet up on an ottoman, and picked up a folded newspaper to read. That was too much for Lucius who went over to the 'little' man and jerked the paper from his hands.

"This is about your daughter!" he declared sharply. "Have you no curiosity about why we have come?"

George Granger did have enough sense to show a bit of the fear that was churning in his stomach to the wizard that stood indignantly over him. His voice quavered slightly as he replied, "Jean was supposed to send a letter to you. Didn't you get it?"

Lucius frowned, puzzled. He glanced at his wife. Narcissa spoke up, "We have received nothing from the Granger's since we introduced ourselves via correspondence." She turned to Jean. "What letter is your husband referring to, Mrs. Granger?"

Jean ignored Narcissa and looked at George. "I didn't write it. I felt the one we wrote to her would be sufficient and she could just go to them, George."

"Ah," he acknowledged. He then glanced up at Lucius. "There you have it, then, Mr. Malfoy. Might I have my paper back?"

Lucius despised this useless, lackadaisical Muggle. Taking out his wand, he pointed it in the man's face. "Get up, you miserable excuse for a man!" He smiled thinly as the fear withing George was slowly released. "Now!"

George squeaked and keeping an eye on the tip of the wand, he scrambled from his recliner until he was standing on his feet.

Snape held up the letter that Hermione should have gotten. "This is the only letter that was sent," he sneered with distaste. "You are very fortunate that Hermione did not read these cruel words, or she surely would have died beneath their cruelty."

Lucius picked up Snape's anger and prodded George with his wand, "Have you no sense of the treasure you're so willing to toss out on the trash heap?" An acrid scent suddenly assaulted Lucius' nose and he took out a handkerchief to cover his nose and protect his olfactory senses from further insult. "You're a coward!" he spat as he glanced down in disgust at the tell-tale wet stain on the front of George's trousers.

"You leave George alone, you unnatural thing!" demanded Jean. She started to go over to her husband, but Narcissa had her quickly bound in place with a flick of her wand. She had also Silenced the woman.

"I have a question I would like answered," Narcissa said almost casually. However, she was twirling her wand lightly, and anyone who had ever dueled the Malfoy matriarch knew that the witch could snap out at least three spells before her opponent could blink. "How did you ever manage to adopt a child into your household without a proper explanation as to what happened to your first child?"

Lucius and Snape glanced quickly at each other. This was something neither of them had thought of, so they were very interested in the bound woman's answer.

A quick slash of her wand and Narcissa lifted the Silencing Spell. Jean blurted, "We don't have to tell you a damned thing!"

Another slash of her wand and the Silencing Spell was back. Narcissa turned to Snape. "Severus, you wouldn't happen to have any Veritaserum with you, would you?"

Snape smiled, and it was decidedly not a pleasant smile. "I do, Narcissa." He took out the small bottle of truth potion and went to administer it to Jean. She tried to bite him and he locked her jaws in place with a Lockjaw Charm giving him enough time to dose her with three drops of the potent brew.

Narcissa reversed the Binding Spell and removed the Silencing Spell once more and Jean dropped placidly into a nearby chair. Narcissa smiled pleasantly at Snape. "You really are a superb brewer, Severus. Just look how quickly the Veritaserum took effect."

Snape bowed graciously, but with a very slight, facetious smirk on his lips, at the compliment.

Jean Granger breathed slowly and evenly. Lucius, tired of George's stinking indiscretion Scourgified it and silently ordered the milquetoast back into his recliner.

"What are you doing to her?" George asked. His voice was full of curiosity and not one bit of concern. That further annoyed Lucius who simply gave the weak man a snarl to make him shut up.

Narcissa moved a little closer to Jean, touched her index fingertip to the woman's chin, and tipped the Muggle woman's gaze upward. "What is the story you have told everyone about your first daughter's disappearance from your home?"

Jean Granger spoke matter-of-factly, "Hermione tried to hurt herself this Summer. We decided to send her to a prestigious asylum in America where she has been indefinitely committed."

Narcissa's fingers twitched uneasily over her wand. Snape spoke quietly in a low, teaching voice to Narcissa, "Watch her body language, as I taught you. What do you see?"

"She believes her own lie." Stated Narcissa and Snape nodded in agreement. Narcissa carefully studied the woman whose Silent Language shone through despite her Veritaserum haze.

Lucius turned to George. "Do you believe Hermione insane?" he demanded.

George shrugged his shoulders, "I suppose it's better to believe than the truth."

"And what is the truth?" asked Lucius, his words deceptively kind, and wrapped in velvet.

"I fathered something unnatural," George made it sound like a pitiful confession.

Lucius slapped the poor excuse for a man and a father with the back of his own hand. If he wanted to welcome a cell at Azkaban, he would curse the Muggle with an Unforgivable, but he refrained from doing so; for Hermione's sake.

Narcissa continued her interrogation. "It is far too soon for you to have legally adopted a child, especially since your first daughter seems to have conveniently disappeared to America. Is Araminta adopted?"

Jean shook her head. "There would have been too many questions. My brother..."

George suddenly exploded from his recliner. "Your brother? Gus?" Lucius was so startled, he almost did hex the Muggle. It was Snape who swiftly stopped the older wizard from doing so. "What's that criminal delinquent got to do with Araminta? I thought he was still in prison!"

Jean, under the Veritaserum, could not help but tell the truth, and she did. "Gus got out almost a year ago, George. I just told him what I needed."

"Good God, Jean! Did Gus kidnap Araminta? Did he?" he demanded sharply.

"Gus didn't," asserted Jean primly.

Lucius grasped George Granger by the collar of his shirt. "Where is your Muggle telephone?"

George babbled, "This wasn't my fault! She showed me paperwork that all looked legal! If I'd known that her brother was involved...!"

The patrician wizard sneered, "Oh? Do tell? Would you have grown a backbone and done something about it? Called in your Aurors? Hm?" When the dentist could only stammer nonsensically, Lucius practically threw the Muggle into his recliner, then stabbed his wand into the man's face. "Muggle telephone, coward." George pointed

towards the kitchen. "I'm calling Detective Stanley, Severus. This is too twisted for us to deal with."

Snape agreed with a nod. Narcissa left Jean Granger and went down the hall where the little girl vanished. She found Araminta sitting on a make-shift bed on an old leather couch in a study.

"Will you come with me, child?" she asked gently, holding out her arms.

The little girl didn't move. "Are you taking me back home?"

"I won't leave your side until you're back in the arms of your parents," promised Narcissa.

The little girl smiled nervously, but walked over to Narcissa and stood in front of her. "My name's Jenny," she murmured softly. Narcissa ran her hand gently over the golden hair of curls and discovered it was thick with Muggle hair product. Giving a moue of disgust, she waved her wand and chanted a Scourgify that removed the sticky, lacquer-like product. The little girl's perfect curls relaxed until her hair was a perfectly straight fall of pale gold.

Jenny touched her straight hair. "Thanks. I wish you could do the same to my teeth."

Narcissa worriedly examined the child's perfectly straight, pearly white smile. The older woman recalled how Hermione had explained the type of work her parents did – with teeth. Narcissa had shuddered at how terrible it all sounded. She decided she didn't want to know what the awful Grangers might have put little Jenny through to get such a perfect smile. Taking Jenny's hand, she drew the girl back out towards the living room.

While Narcissa had gone for the little girl, Snape had trussed up George Granger and he now sat, bound by strong rope, in his recliner. Jean Granger, still under the influence of Veritaserum, sat harmlessly on the ottoman.

Lucius had finished his phone call and turned to his wife and friend. "I have spoken to Det. Stanley and apprised him of the situation. He is sending the local constabulary to come and pick up the Grangers but an Auror, working on the Muggle side will be with them to

Obliviate our presence and to cast Compulsion Spells that will keep them from being able to discuss where Hermione truly is."

Narcissa asked, "They'll want to know why Hermione is gone."

Stanley is already working with a few of his contacts to produce a paper trail in the Muggle news media about the Grangers daughter having disappeared under mysterious circumstances," explained Lucius.

"That appears rather complicated," mused Snape. "Wouldn't it be better to just Obliviate the existence of Hermione from her parents' minds?"

"Easier, maybe," agreed Lucius. "Unfortunately, quite a bit more than just the Grangers would need their memories altered. Stanley will find a way to satisfactorily conclude the mystery over Hermione's disappearance during the investigation that will emerge from this."

Snape frowned, "And just what will that conclusion lead to, Lucius?"

Lucius pursed his lips, not liking any of this, but they had no choice. "I expect that Hermione Granger will become dead in the Muggle world."

Snape folded his arms over his chest. He was quiet, as they all were, for a long moment. "This is going to be very hard on Miss... on my little Snake," he grimaced, sending a glare towards the two Grangers.

Lucius walked over to the tall, dark man and gripped his right forearm briefly, "We'll be there for her, Severus." He then walked over to his wife and the little girl. "You want to stay with her, don't you, love?" he asked softly.

"Jenny must know she'll be safe until she is back with her parents," Narcissa insisted in a whisper. Lucius merely nodded and directed his wife, with the little girl, over to the sofa. And so, they all waited.

By mid-morning, Harry and Draco had finished the amount of homework they had decided to work on and then they went exploring. Hermione had told them about the room on the seventh floor with the Mirror of Erised, so that was where they decided to go.



That was after some arguing between the two boys about whether or not it was really smart to go looking for that room. Draco convinced Harry that with the two of them, it wouldn't be dangerous like it was for Hermione who had been all alone.

The seventh floor was a fascinating place that had dozens of rooms to look into. Some were empty, and some were crammed full of the most intriguing junk to be found.

In one room they discovered armor and weapons scattered everywhere. As little boys are wont to do each boy put on pieces of the heavy armor, picked up swords, and battled each other until an assembled suit of armor got cheeky and batted at them with the flat of its sword. Dropping swords and armor pieces, Harry and Draco quickly abandoned that room, yelling, not because they were scared, but it felt exhilarating.

Another room had dozens of books that were just sitting on the floor. That room lost its appeal the moment Draco picked up a book, opened it, and found himself blown by a great wind into a stack of books that slid and tumbled to the floor the moment he struck.

One of the last rooms they peered into was a room that was empty but for dozens of framed paintings on its walls. None of them moved and they were all landscapes, or seascapes. All but one which was of a veiled lady in red who scared them both nearly out of their skin when she ordered them to leave in a shrill voice.

Both boys ran down the corridor, their yelps turning into giggles. Near the end of the corridor was one door partly opened. Draco was the first to peer in and he announced, "There's a mirror in here!"

Harry followed Draco into the Mirror Room and they both walked around the mirror until they stood in front of it. The reflective surface was dark and provided them with such faint reflections that they were almost ghostly outlines.

"I think it's dirty, Harry," mused Draco as he leaned in closer to the surface to peer back at his faint reflection.

Harry stepped a little closer to the mirror. "That looks more like the tarnish I used to have to clean off Aunt Petunia's silver tea set," remarked Harry.

"I don't see what's so special about it." Draco raised his hand and pressed his fingertips to the glass.

A loud crack echoed in the room and Draco jumped back. Harry watched as a crack appeared in the mirror and then traveled in a jagged path up the middle. It stopped a few inches from the gilded frame's edge.

"Curious."

Both boys, startled once again, let out a yelp until they saw the Headmaster gliding through the doorway.

"Sir, we didn't mean to break it!" Harry tried to convince Dumbledore.

Dumbledore, who had been examining the mirror, dropped his gaze to Harry's. Harry, recalling that his father warned him about letting the Headmaster catch his gaze, swept his eyes down to a fluttering canary on the green, velvet robes the Headmaster wore.

"No matter, my boy. It was an old mirror." His eyes glanced over the floor around the base of the mirror. Harry, noting the quick pursing of the man's thin lips, pushed Draco back a few steps and followed him.

"Can we go, sir?" asked Draco.

"Of course," the Headmaster spoke amicably. Both boys started to leave until Dumbledore laid a hand on Harry's shoulder, stopping him. "I would like the Stone, Harry."

"Stone? I don't have a stone, sir," protested Harry a bit shortly.

To Harry's surprise, the Headmaster gripped his chin and forced Harry to look into his bleak gaze. Caught by surprise, he had to scramble to put up his Occlumens shields. Dumbledore only scraped the surface of the boy's mind and saw that Harry was telling the truth. Harry let out a groan as a terrible headache struck him. He didn't realise right away that he was free of the Headmaster's touch.

"You leave Harry alone!" Draco shouted angrily at the Headmaster.

Dumbledore scowled at the boys, but made no move to calm Draco. He then smiled, shook his head sadly, drew out his wand and simply said, "Obliviate."

By the end of a very long day the Grangers had been taken in by the local authorities. Jean Granger was arrested in regards to aiding and abetting a kidnapping whereas George was being held in regards to the outcome of a pending investigation into the disappearance of his daughter, Hermione Jean Granger. Det. Henry Aloysius Stanley would carefully let slip certain details that would lead the police on a merry chase that would eventually end with the conclusion that Hermione had run away from her parents neglect and perished from the elements. It would keep George Granger out of prison, but it would not keep his reputation from being severely tarnished.

With the help of discrete touches of magic, Jenny's parents were found before the night was through. It was discovered that she had been taken from a shopping mall at the tender age of two years old and sold, twice, to families that wanted a daughter. They became the victims of a fraud when the girl was kidnapped away from the families that bought her. Gus, Jean's brother, had apparently been in on a deal to defraud his own sister in the same manner, but he didn't get a chance to re-kidnap Jenny. Even though Jean had been set up to be defrauded, she would get prison time. Lucius had decreed it, so Det. Stanley would see to it that Jean Granger would spend at least ten years in prison for her crimes and for the neglect and cruelty perpetrated on Hermione. As for Gus, he would be back in prison, permanently, according to Stanley.

Once Jenny was in the arms of two very emotional, and thankful young people, and Narcissa was assured that they would keep a close eye upon their daughter, Lucius, Narcissa, and Snape finally left to return to their world.

It felt like it ought to be midnight, or later, to Snape, but dinner was just concluding as he was finally able to return to his quarters. Lucius was still at the Ministry dealing with paperwork and more that would eventually dovetail in the Malfoys adopting Hermione. Narcissa was quite pleased at the outcome, but Lucius knew that once they spoke to Hermione she was not going to take well to the happenstance of her family, or her eventual "removal" from the Muggle world.

Today was difficult, but tomorrow would be even more so. Seating himself in his favourite chair by the fire, Snape thought of Harry and what he and Draco might have been up to today. He hadn't heard or received any notifications of points lost or detentions, so he hoped that meant all was well. Just as he was sinking deeper into the warm leather of the chair...

"Severus Snape!" The scolding voice of Poppy Pomfrey had Snape awake and on his feet in a shot. He glanced at the now green flames to see a very irate medi-witch's head in his Floo. "Where have you been all day?"

"I have been..." was all Snape managed to get out.

"Come to the Infirmary right now! Harry needs you!" Her head vanished from the Floo.

"Harry?" he wondered softly, all his muscles tightening in sudden fear and worry. He stepped through the green flames and into the Infirmary.

Saturday, Nov. 16, 1991 – two steps back, earlier in the day

Harry blinked a few times and frowned as he looked around himself. His eyes lit upon Draco who was also blinking, and yawning a bit.

"What happened?" asked Harry.

Draco shook his head. "Dunno. Do you know where we are, Harry?"

The room, though dark as the torches were not lit, was lit by faint daylight from an enchanted window. Jars and bottles and phials glittered in the faint light to fade into long shadows upon the floor. It was their Potions classroom and they were both on the floor.

"It's the Potions classroom," Harry said as he tried to stand. His head swum viciously and he felt his stomach tip dangerously. He lay down with his cheek against the cold floor and felt some relief.

"You okay, Harry?" Draco asked as he lifted himself from his position on the floor and moved over to his friend.

"Uh uh," he mumbled into the floor, which had thankfully been cleaned on Friday by two older Slytherins that had detention in the evening. "My head hurts."

"Let's go to the Infirmary, then. I don't think Professor Snape is back, yet, and Madame Pomfrey's got some Headache Relief Potion that should help."

Harry slowly rose, gritting his teeth at the pain. Draco slipped under Harry's arm, doing his best to support his friend. The dungeon Potions classroom wasn't far from the Infirmary, but Harry's growing headache was making the journey all the more difficult. They were literally stumbling over each other when they both reached the Infirmary.

An hour into the boys' visit, Poppy had exhausted her knowledge and had given Harry an adult strength migraine relieving potion, the same potion Snape used to relieve his migraines. Nothing worked and Harry, who was doing his best not to cry, since that made his head feel worse, lay down on his side with a cool mask the medi-witch had conjured over his eyes. Draco was watching his friend on one side of the bed, while Hermione, who had been serving detention with the medi-witch, sat on Harry's other side, but on the bed. Harry was facing Draco while Hermione rubbed her friend's back.

By now, Poppy had tried to reach Snape, but had been informed that he was gone from the castle and not expected back until late. It was late in the afternoon and Harry was still in pain. By the time the large, silent clock in the Infirmary ticked upon the fourth hour in the day, the medi-witch had no choice but to relieve Harry's suffering by putting him under a Sleep Spell. Unfortunately, she had to wake the poor boy up every hour to check his vitals and to make sure that there was no damage to report. It was fifteen minutes of hell for Harry, and it tore Poppy apart to see the child's face streaked with silent tears as he hurt so much.

Finally, a house elf that had been told to watch for Professor Snape, came to announce that the wizard was back. Poppy wasted no time in calling for the Potions Master who arrived through the same Floo connection just after dinner at seven in the evening.

Poppy quickly apprised Snape of the situation before waking Harry. "Harry came in this afternoon complaining of a headache. He said when it first showed up it was a dull ache, behind his eyes. It became worse on their way here. Harry is unable to tolerate any light and he has described the headache as though his brain is throbbing with an ache behind his eyes."

Snape reached down to run his fingers through his son's long, slightly messy, black hair. "And he has not responded to any of the pain medications for headaches or migraines?"

"The last one I tried was a dose of your migraine formula, Severus," Poppy shook her head. "Nothing." She paused watching as Snape's lips thinned and he briefly pinched the bridge of his nose in thought. "Severus, if this helps, Harry has been consistent in describing his pain by saying 'something inside his brain hurts'."

Snape glanced up. "Poppy, do your scans show that he actually has a headache or a migraine?"

"He does not. By all my scans, he should be perfectly healthy." Poppy noted that Snape's eyes widened perceptibly with dawning understanding. "What is it, Severus?" she asked.

Snape held up his hand. He had a few questions, first. He turned to Draco. "Mr. Malfoy, what were you and Harry doing today. Be truthful," he warned, "this is critical as to whether or not I can help your friend."

Draco swallowed and nodded his head. "Well, we finished our homework and decided to do some exploring. Hermione had told us all about the Mirror of Erised, so we thought that we'd go and find it." Draco gulped as his teacher's thunderous expression showed his disapproval of their target for exploration. "It was broken, though, sir! At least, I think it was... well, it sure was when I touched it."

"What do you mean, Mr. Malfoy?" asked Snape, his voice sounding terribly dangerous.

Draco shuddered, but continued, "Well, it was all dark, and... well, Harry said it looked tarnished. You know, like silver gets tarnished? Anyway, I just wanted to touch it, and when I did it cracked all up and down the middle, and..." he frowned sharply as he tried to figure

something out. Snape watched the young boy carefully. "That's weird... I... uhm..."

"Continue, please, Mr. Malfoy. After the mirror cracked, what happened?" pushed Snape.

"I don't know," Draco almost wailed. "I mean, it cracked, but then Harry and I weren't in front of the mirror anymore! We were in Potions class." Draco frowned, trying to make sense of what had happened.

Snape tapped his chin thoughtfully. "You were on the seventh floor, and then in the dungeons. Did you just suddenly appear there, or did you wake up there?"

"We woke up, sir," Draco said firmly. "But, I know I didn't go to sleep in Potions, so I'm pretty sure Harry remembers that he didn't either."

"Are you aware, Mr. Malfoy, that the Potions classroom is sealed on the weekends?" Snape gave the boy a stern look.

Thinking he might be in trouble, Draco glanced worriedly at his teacher before slowly shaking his head side to side. "No, sir."

"You are not in trouble, Mr. Malfoy." Snape sighed and Transfigured a chair from a coin in his pocket. "Do come here." He motioned the boy to stand in front of him, almost touching his knees. "I am going to Legilimens you, Draco, but I need you to let down your shields and let me in. I promise that I will not look for anything that didn't happen to you today. Will you trust me?"

Draco nodded, but asked very quietly, "It won't hurt?"

"As long as you allow me in, it will not hurt at all," Snape promised.

"Okay." Draco opened his eyes wide and looked into the deep, dark eyes of his Head of House. He never felt a thing. Within seconds, it seemed to be all over and he smiled shyly. "Did I help Harry, sir?"

Snape forced a smile to briefly touch his lips. "You did, Mr. Malfoy. Now, go sit with Miss Granger."

Draco did so, and Poppy leaned slightly down towards Snape. "Is it what I suspect, Severus?" she spoke softly so the children wouldn't hear.

Snape didn't answer, but he did nod. He moved his chair closer to his son just as Poppy lifted the Sleeping Spell. He touched Harry's cheek. "Harry? Little One, I need you to sit up and to let me into your thoughts."

"It hurts, Dad," he whimpered, shutting his eyes tightly.

"I know it does, son," he whispered. "Just turn onto your back and then look only into my eyes. I will take the pain away."

Harry shuffled, and wiggled until he was on his back. His hands were over his eyes and Snape gently drew the small hands away. He then very lightly touched the pads of his thumbs to Harry's tightly squeezed together eyes. Poppy lowered the lights until the torches burned very dimly casting the Infirmary into shadow.

"Open up, son," Snape ordered softly. Harry's eyes flew open and the Potions Master almost flinched away from the dark mossy green of pain that was reflected in his son's eyes. He didn't, though, and cast, "Legilimens!"

Snape was so startled by the brick wall that appeared in front of him that he took three, unsteady steps backwards. It only took a few seconds to settle himself in his son's mind and he realised this was simply a large wall that hid Harry's more complex Occlumens shield. It was only a short walk to a tall, wrought iron gate that opened invitingly at his presence; a clear signal that Harry was giving his father no resistance.

Stepping into the now, very expansive garden, Snape had to marvel at what his son had accomplished with the basic Occlumens skills he had taught his son. He was at a level that had taken Snape almost two years to master.

Harry wasn't in sight, but as Snape observed the garden he noticed that a thick, green and sinuous vine with lush, purple flowers that grew everywhere along the floor of the garden, began to slither out of his way, and cozied up to the roots of the trees. The vine was what Harry had once described as his guardian. Snape had to admit



that the 'guardian' unnerved him as he felt as though he were being watched by the thing. He had tested them once, despite his son's misgivings, during one of their lessons. Deliberately provoking the guardian the vine had swiftly coiled around his ankles and knees, and proceeded to cause the Potions Master such a panic that he was swiftly pushed from his son's mind. It had been so unsettling an experience that he never wanted to deal with the guardian again. Unfortunately, Harry had almost been inconsolable at having 'hurt' his Dark Man.

Stepping further into the garden, he came upon the pond that was surrounded by boulders, and rocks, and the angelic statue of Lily. The pond had once separated the Fiend that was Voldemort in the bodies of dozens of ghastly fish from Harry's mind. For a time, even after gaining possession of Quirrell, the Fiend had still had a connection to Harry's psyche, his nightmares, and horrid visions of the present, through the fish in that pond. That was until the day they had visited the Ministry and Draco and Harry had been drawn into the depths of the Department of Mysteries. In a desperate need to save his best friend from death at the hands of the Fiend, Harry had cast a Patronus from a prison within his mind that expelled Voldemort and had given Quirrell such a backlash that he still lay within the Infirmary in a coma.

Snape touched the statue of Lily and was once again startled as the stone statue moved, lifted an arm, and pointed out a path to him. Nodding his thanks, Snape approached the path and continued his walk.

Many of the plants and flowers were nothing like anything one would ever see in either the Muggle world, or the magical one. Harry had shown his childish delight in creating the flora. Flowers were colourful, almost with faces that giggled and smiled. Some flowers had a grand majesty to them and an intricacy that was not seen until you stopped and looked closely at the flower. The flowers were decoys that hid some of Harry's memories, but these were benign, and some were new, happy ones that had been created by his friendships with Draco and Hermione, and a growing trust of his father.

Snape had seen these flowers in better times, though. All of them had their blossoms closed and their stems drooped the heavy blooms until many lay upon the grass almost like drunkards. Smaller

tendrils of the guardian vine were everywhere and they wiggled and moved so much like a snake that Snape was not tempted to investigate the flowers.

Adding to the oddity of the flowers, were the trees. They usually appeared as solid sentinels, being nothing more than trees, but Harry had once shown his father just how he had managed to hide some of his unhappier memories in the bark. Deeper down, within the extensive roots, were the worst of Harry's memories. Everything he tried to forget. Snape knew that this was where the Dursleys were, where the nightmares came from, and where the flashbacks grew from. The leaves of the trees were falling, almost like snowflakes around him.

Snape's walk became more strident as he made his way through the garden looking for Harry. After what seemed like a timeless walk that wove along natural paths through the garden, he finally spotted his son.

Near a corner of the garden, Harry was curled up atop lush moss. The moss was the only thing untouched; around the moss was ground that had been burned, flash burned, as though lightning had come down to strike it. Snape knelt down on one knee and called to his son.

"Little One?"

Harry remained on his side and Snape watched as the body he was familiar with shimmered and changed to that of a much younger child; probably three or four years old.

"I don't wanna play no more," Harry whined. "Go 'way." He flipped over so his back was to his father.

"Oh I know, child," Snape sympathised. "Someone truly does not know how to play fair, do they?" Child-Harry shook his head, but kept turned away. "We can fix this." He stretched a hand out to touch the ground. "Will you help me?"

Child-Harry turned to face Snape and smiled beatifically as he recognised who Snape was. "Dark Man!" he breathed out. Snape smiled at the very young child. Child-Harry scrambled to his feet, jumped off the lump of moss and threw himself at Snape. The Dark

Man enfolded the little boy in his voluminous robes. Little legs wrapped around his waist as small arms circled his neck. The small head with a shock of unruly black hair rested against his neck and he leaned his cheek against the soft hair.

"There's my Little One," Snape breathed in relief.

Harry pulled back slightly to look up into Snape's eyes. "Do you know what we gotta do, Dark Man?" he asked seriously.

Snape glanced down at the burnt ground. "We need to heal this poor earth and plant new flowers, I think."

Harry grinned. His Dark Man was so smart! Slipping out of the embrace he held out a trowel and a garden fork which the Dark Man took. Child-Harry then delved a hand into the pocket of his shorts, which, like the sweatshirt he wore, were too big for his small body. Child-Harry had to lean slightly to the side to reach the bottom of the pocket. Triumphant he pulled out some seeds.

Child-Harry jumped off the green moss and knelt on both knees beside the tall, dark-clothed wizard. "Okay, you have to do this right, Dark Man. The earth is hard so we take the fork..." he paused, watching as his Dark Man took the fork and scraped it across the burnt earth, turning the scorching away to be replaced by the rich soil beneath. Child-Harry clapped his hands. "That's it!"

Child-Harry, as he took the trowel from Snape, grew just a bit older. Snape estimated that Child-Harry was now about six. Very studiously, and carefully, Harry dug a trench with a trowel, measuring the length of the trench by spreading his small hand over it. When he came to a burned area, Snape raked the soil, and Harry would dig another trench. Man and child kept at this until there were neat, open trenches a Harry hands-breadth in length all around the mossy patch where Harry had lain. Child-Harry, now about nine years old, took the trowel and rake, put them aside, then took Snape's hand, palm up, and poured some of the seeds into the older man's hand.

"You take that side, I'll take this side," directed Child-Harry. Very solemnly he ordered softly, "That's all the seed I got so don't put it all in one trench. Okay?"

Snape nodded that he understood. Parting, yet still on their knees, Snape and Child-Harry began to drop a measure of seeds into a trench, then covered it over by hand until all were done. When Snape looked up from his task, his son was almost returned. Child-Harry had aged another year and a half, perhaps, but Snape was certain he was not yet eleven.

Child-Harry rose to his feet and handed Snape a watering can. "Would you, Dark Man?" Harry asked politely.

Snape rose to his feet, brushed the dirt from his knees, and took the watering can from Harry. He liberally sprinkled the area they had planted with seeds. As he did so, grass sprouted, then thickened, and flowers, snapdragons and freesias popped through the soil and bloomed. When all the water was gone, the sprinkler vanished from Snape's hand. He felt small fingers, familiarly sized fingers, grasp onto his. Looking down, Child-Harry was gone and in his place was Just-Harry – Harry James Snape.

Harry smiled up at his father. "Let's go home, Dad."

Harry, now free of the pain in his head, sat at a table in the corner of the Infirmary with Hermione and Draco, eating the dinner they had missed. Poppy and Snape sat upon the edge of the bed where Harry had been all afternoon.

"He was Legilimised," Snape spoke quietly, tightly. "Then, to cover that crime, both boys were Obliviated and then moved to my Potions classroom."

"You know who did it," Poppy spat, but she kept her voice controlled, and quiet.

"I suspect who did it, Poppy, but with that," he pointed towards the still comatose Quirrell, "still abed there, I cannot be certain."

"Would the Fiend be capable of such physical work, Severus?" she asked the dark man in puzzlement.

"Normally I would not think so, but this is Voldemort that is the Fiend, Poppy. I cannot be certain that he is at all trapped within that body." He grimaced as he felt useless not knowing what to do about the evil that lay, possibly dormant, so close to them.

"I do not understand why Draco and Harry were in your classroom, Severus. Why not leave them where they were?" asked Poppy. "That makes no sense." The medi-witch stated knowing that the two boys had received a detention for their adventure to look for the Mirror of Erised.

"But it does," he smiled, a grim, unpleasant and knowing smile, "If it were the Headmaster, he does not care for the relationship I have with Harry. He knew I had threatened dire punishment if my son was found there again, and I've no doubt that the Headmaster hoped that my punishment for Harry would be a physical one that would plant seeds of resentment within the child."

Poppy glanced, appalled, at Harry and the other two children. "But he knows you've never hit a child! You've always been an advocate for those we discovered were being hurt. Why would he think that?"

"Because I spanked Miss Granger in front of everyone in the Great Hall," he replied. Poppy had not known of that incident, and so he explained the girl's hysterical shouting over the loss of her books, right there at breakfast. "She wouldn't stop shouting, and so I grabbed her and smacked her bottom. Once. I only wanted..."

Poppy interrupted with a nod, and finished, "You needed to get her attention, and you certainly couldn't slap her in the face." Snape's jaw almost dropped in surprise, thinking his friend might be intimating that he would blithely hit someone in the face. "Anyone, adult or child, is subject to hysterics, Severus," she explained, patting his arm. "It is not acceptable to slap a child to bring them out of such a state, but experts, both magical and Muggle, agree that a sharp sound, such as a clapping of the hands near their face, or, for a child, a smack to the bottom, will break the cycle of the hysteria. What you did is quite understandable."

"I know that," his tone almost a growl. "I believe, though, that as Dumbledore was a witness to that, he might have misinterpreted it and expected I would be even more forceful with my son."

Poppy smirked at him, "And will you be? Beyond the detention?"

Snape glowered. "They will have Potions ingredients to prepare for having gone after that stupid mirror, Poppy. Green shrivelfigs are

particularly difficult to pickle." Poppy chuckled. Snape looked up, just as Harry was smiling shyly at him from the make-shift dinner table. "There is nothing that would make me hit my child."

Snape threw up a Silencing Spell as he startled Poppy with a sudden burst of passionate anger. "How am I to keep my child safe when a Fiend threatens his sanity at the same time that an old man keeps pushing him into situations where he gets hurt?" He pushed up from the bed they had been sitting down together on and paced slightly. "Merlin's rotted feet, Poppy! Do you know how much I would just like to have to deal with my son's own mischief? I do not even know if he has it in him to be just a normal, disobedient child! He is always so polite around me, like a... like an obedient, little duck!"

Poppy chuckled as she imagined Harry as a little duck in black robes following behind in the wake of his father's billowing robes. She smiled, "Doesn't any parent want their child to be polite, to follow the rules, Severus?"

Snape scowled at the witch's deliberate misunderstanding. "I just want my son to have a normal childhood, Poppy. Boys want to explore this old stone carcass, and they should be allowed to do so. Do you realise how much I wish that I could punish my child for simply doing what is normal for inquisitive, little boys to do? But, no! My son gets mind-raped, and then Obliviated by some doddering, lemon-pushing, old twit who believes Harry has some sort of awesome power to defeat a mad creature!" He tried to calm himself, but when he saw Harry laughing with his friends, oblivious to the drama behind the Silencing Spell, he turned back to Poppy. "Dumbledore is going to get my son killed for his beliefs, and then what am I to do?"

Poppy pulled Snape back down beside her. She pushed his hair off his face, and then took his face between her hands as she looked intently into his eyes, "You will do what needs to be done, my dear. Keep your son, and your Snakes, as safe as you can, but allow us to help." Snape frowned lightly. Poppy smiled. "Lucius, Narcissa, Remus, myself, and Minerva."

"Minerva?" Snape asked as Poppy allowed her hands to drop to her lap. He recalled the looks the older woman had given the old Headmaster at the Welcoming Feast. Those looks that had made him wonder if the old friendship was becoming strained.

"Of course, Minerva," the witch huffed as though he should have known better. "Look, Severus, Minerva has made mistakes, and she is paying for them. As all of us must, when the Balance is due. Dumbledore will pay for his, too, only I hope that his is not a terrible price. Minerva has seen that the Headmaster's thoughts are only on this perceived notion of Harry that he has in his mind, and she is a Lioness who will do everything to protect the child of Lily." Poppy wagged a finger at him. "Don't forget, that as much as you grieved for Lily's loss, Minerva loved Lily as her own daughter and has never gotten over that loss."

Snape stared at Poppy. He knew Minerva was as attached to her Cubs as he was to his Snakes, but he really had not known how deeply the older witch had felt towards Lily. "Does she still...?"

"Grieve?" asked Poppy softly, and then she nodded. "She has yet to say anything to you, because of the problems she had with Hermione, but Minerva wishes to have some of the closeness she once had with Lily from Harry. Trust me, Severus, just as you would, Minerva would protect that boy with all of her Gryffindor ferocity."

Poppy rose to her feet, brushed her hands over her apron, and then, with a wave of her wand, she removed the Silencing Spell, and went to join the children just as pudding arrived.

Snape looked at Hermione, Draco, and then at his son. Despite what had happened to him today, Harry laughed, free of the pain. Any pain. He meant to keep it that way. With, perhaps, a new resolve, he went to join his son, and his two favourite Snakes, and Poppy, for pudding.

Once the late dinner in the Infirmary was concluded, Snape sent his Snakes back to their common room. Poppy returned to her office, and the Potions Master found himself alone, in the great, sterile room, with the figure of Quirrell. Raising his hand in a swooping gesture, all around the room a shimmering of blue ghosted for a moment before fading again.

It was a ward that Snape had put up around the Infirmary in the hopes of keeping the Fiend that occupied the DADA professor from moving beyond the large room. It was an old spell that Snape had learned out of necessity, since the Hogwarts ghosts seemed to think

nothing of drifting into his private quarters at all hours, sometimes startling him from the depths of his nightmares. The ward had originally been devised to keep ghostly spirits from crossing a protected threshold into a sanctuary. Snape had refashioned the spell, as he cast the ward, to create a prison for the Fiend. The ward was still solidly in place, but whether it worked or not, he could not know. If Voldemort was not anchored to Quirrell's mind, free to roam, then when Snape cast the spell, the monster could have already been gone.

The Potions Master glared down at the silent Quirrell. "You will not get my son," Snape threatened with a dangerous sneer.

He watched with interest as Quirrell's lips began to move, hissing issuing forth between them. Carefully he bent over, keeping one hand on his wand as it slipped forward from his sleeve, and one eye on the prone man.

Sibilant laughter brushed across his ear and he heard the word, "Traitor." It was not spoken in Quirrell's trembling tenor.

Snape straightened sharply. He smirked, "Only to you." With a sharp, decisive turn, he swept from the Infirmary. He never saw the tear that fell from Quirrell's closed eye.

The Potions Master wasn't entirely sure where he was going as he strolled through the castle, but he soon discovered his feet were taking him up the long way to the seventh floor he and Lupin had found Hermione several nights before.

At his approach, the door to the Mirror Room creaked open to allow him in. Snape was a bit surprised to find the Headmaster standing in front of the mirror as his hand stroked thoughtfully through his beard. Snape scowled, thinking of his son. He knew that it had been Dumbledore who had hurt Harry. As far as he knew there wasn't another person in the castle who could have cast the Legilimens and Obliviate spells. Legilimens is really not an accepted spell to teach, and as for Obliviate, unless one is an Auror, it is a violation of Ministry law to use it. Albus Dumbledore, as head of the Wizengamot probably had permission to use the spell. Snape wondered if he was as skilled as the Aurors had to be, or was his technique with that Mind Manipulating Spell as inept as his Legilimens skills were.



For a moment Snape's fingers touched his wand as his anger rose within him at the harm and the damage caused to his child. Just when he thought he might hex the old meddler, he was stopped cold.

Dumbledore spun gracefully to meet Snape's hard glare. He smiled, gently, and his eyes twinkled, with delight (?) at seeing his Potions professor? Snape wasn't certain, so he did not move from his spot.

"Is there a problem, Severus?" asked the Headmaster.

It annoyed Snape that the old fool appeared to be so clueless... no, unconcerned about what he had done to Harry.

"You Legilimised my son," he spoke through a clenched jaw.

"The boys were playing and I felt it important for me to keep an eye upon them," Dumbledore replied vaguely, then waved the younger wizard over to him, closer to the mirror. Snape moved a bit closer, his wand sliding, slowly into his hand. "I believed that Harry broke the Mirror of Erised," he declared, pointing a long finger at the single, crazed crack in the aged looking, reflective glass. "When I asked him to give me the Stone, he denied any knowledge of it. It was necessary."

The younger wizard seethed and his wand was now firmly in his hand. He had no doubt that the Headmaster could see it and he made no move to conceal it. "Distrust, again, Albus? Is that why you hurt my son with your brutal Legilimens?" Snape's wand arm was, in a blink, straight and taut as he pointed his wand in menace at the older wizard.

Dumbledore made no sign that he even realised he was being threatened. "It was a poor decision..." his voice was regretful, apologetic.

"You Obliviated Harry and Draco after violating my son's mind! Do not try to excuse this with contrition you do not feel, Albus. For once in your damnable life be truthful with me! What you did was wrong!" Snape watched as Dumbledore did manage to flinch at his Potions professor's anger. Yet, he wondered, would the old man continue to try and twist this to his advantage?

Snape watched cannily as the Headmaster stepped so close to the end of his wand, that his chest was almost touching the tip. The Potions Master did not ease his wand away and Dumbledore knew, without a doubt, that the young wizard would curse him with his worst. The old man drew his fingers through his beard and began to speak, his soft, blue eyes twinkling calmly.

"I hid the Philosopher's Stone within the Mirror of Erised. Harry admitted that they broke it, somehow," Dumbledore tapped his chin, for a moment he puzzled over how the mirror could have gotten broken. He then sighed, and shrugged, "As I have not found the Stone anywhere in this room, the boy must have it. Harry is in great danger from that Stone, Severus." The Headmaster's eyes twinkled brightly, a small flash of delight, as Snape's wand hand faltered, lowering just a bit.

"How could that Stone hurt him?" demanded Snape. He blinked suddenly as he felt a heavy, invisible mist drifting around his mind. Questions, demands, emotions were all being gently dampened, calmed, and scattered. Snape tried his best to keep it all coherent as he wanted answers from Dumbledore.

"Allow me to explain, Severus," Dumbledore moved slowly forward, then touched Snape's arm, the one with the wand, and pushed it down. The younger wizard's arm dropped heavily to his side. "The Philosopher's Stone is a Dark Artefact, my boy. Nicholas and Perenelle Flamel have been under its spell for almost 600 years. It was not a simple thing for my dear friend Nicholas when he asked me to take it." He smiled softly, the twinkling of his eyes a soft dazzle that locked Snape's gaze onto his. "They both have lived a long time and both yearn for the rest that Death offers, but the addiction to the Stone was too much. I took it and I had meant to destroy it, as Nicholas requested, but I felt that there might be a need for it and so I placed it in one of my vaults at Gringotts until that time."

The Headmaster waved his hand, conjuring a red velvet sofa that he led Snape over to. The young man dropped heavily and leaned back against it. Not once did Snape's eyes leave those of the Headmaster.

Dumbledore sat beside Snape and began to uncurl the wizard's rigid fingers from around his wand. He kept talking, "When I discovered that Voldemort was a part of Quirinus..."

Snape managed to sit up sharply as he heard this. For a moment, his dizzy brain sharpened and the mental fog was thrust aside. "You knew?" He shook his head and for a moment he did not see those blasted twinkling eyes and he felt his head begin to clear. His fingers re-tightened reflexively upon his wand and Dumbledore held up his hands away from it. "You knew what Quirrell was and you still brought him into this school? There are children here!"

Dumbledore's eyes locked upon the angered glint of Snape's obsidian orbs and the younger man stilled. He was still angry, but he did not voice anything. He was also unable to stop the older man from gently, but firmly prying his wand from his fingers. The Headmaster laid one, consoling hand upon Snape's arm; the left forearm, "Yes, Severus, I knew. I also knew that if we were to have any chance at vanquishing Voldemort before he found a permanent body, he had to be drawn into the walls of Hogwarts. And, with Harry arriving the same year, I knew that it was providential."

Snape glowered, as his thoughts cried, you let him in? Why can I not speak? What have you done to me this time... Snape's further thoughts became a dozen or so creative curses woven with descriptive words. The Potions Master found he was mesmerised by the Headmaster's dancing, twinkling, maddeningly amused eyes.

Albus nodded gently, but not enough that he let slip his gaze from Snape. "Yes, yes, my boy, I know you do not agree with me. The Prophecy is nothing but the words of a..." he paused, briefly, smiling with amusement. "How did you describe Sybil? Oh yes! A raspberry-brandy babbling fraud!"

Snape scowled and tried again to speak, but he felt like his tongue had been twisted by a Tongue-Tie Hex. Dumbledore noticed the struggle, and something else. He conjured a handkerchief and dabbed it gently at the corners of the Potions Master's mouth where he had spotted a bit of drool. Snape's dark eyes burned with indignation.

"Allow me to finish about the Stone, Severus. So, calm yourself and it will be better for you." Getting a small nod from the angry man, Dumbledore spoke once again. "As I said, the Stone is dangerous. It will be nothing more than simple, inert stone, unremarkable in appearance, to anyone who has no wish to use the Stone for their

own needs. However, to someone who does need it they will hear it call to them. A song, I believe Nicholas once described it, that no one else can hear. I knew that the Stone would call to Voldemort even though he was unaware of it. I hoped to trap him in front of the Mirror of Erised. As long as the Stone was within the Mirror, he could only hear it, he could not get it. Unfortunately..." Dumbledore shook his head.

Again Snape tried to talk, but he was unable to do so. To his disgust, the Headmaster dabbed at his lips once more with the handkerchief.

"As you've pointed out, and rightfully so, my skill with Legilimens is terrible and I really should not have tried what I did with Harry," the Headmaster sighed with what appeared to be true regret. "but I admit, my boy, I panicked. I wanted to make certain that he did not have the Stone. My only thought was to protect him." Snape could only scowl in disbelief. "To my disgrace, I did not find the answer to my question and only hurt him."

The Potions Master's mouth jerked open as Snape finally overcame the spell that held him tongue-tied. He wanted to shout and rail, but he didn't and forced himself to speak as calmly as he could manage. "I... may understand your reasoning for the Legilimens, Albus, but I do not like it. You injured my son. It was fortunate I was able to repair the damage, but do you expect me to trust you after doing such a thing to Harry?"

The Headmaster gave Snape a very pointed, critical glance, "You do not trust me now, my boy."

Snape gave Dumbledore a curt nod, conceding that the old man spoke the truth. He glanced at his wand still in the Headmaster's hand, and even though he knew some wandless magic that would work, for a moment, against the older man, with what had happened to him as Dumbledore spoke to him about the Stone, he chose not to. Snape had the sinking, sickening feeling that he had grossly underestimated the man. This doddering, old fool, might not be the twit he sometimes thought of him, and that worried Snape. Terribly.

The younger wizard needed a moment to pull away from this new information, this new power he had not suspected Dumbledore to have. Pushing aside whatever the enchantment had been, Snape did not risk a glance at the older man, but turned his gaze to the

mirror. "Voldemort is a Fiend, Albus. Dead. You could have killed Quirrell, but what were your plans for the spirit?"

Dumbledore rose from the velvet sofa, glided over to the mirror, and placed his hand against its damaged surface. "I would have trapped Voldemort's spirit, and his soul, within the mirror, and then I would have broken it, thus, destroying him utterly." The old man's hand dropped slowly to his beard as he shrugged, almost with indifference. "Alas, now I know of no way to trap that evil."

"If he is trapped at all," remarked Snape, worrying once more about his wards around the Infirmary.

"I believe your wards were unnecessary," asserted Dumbledore as the young man glanced up quickly, and then lowered his lashes, half closing his eyes against the mesmeric gaze of the Headmaster's. He did not catch the quick, resigned sigh from the older man who turned away from the seated, younger wizard. Snape was too clever, by far, and would not trust those eyes again. "What I mean to say, my boy, is that I believe that Voldemort is irrevocably tied to Quirrell. At least, until he dies."

"Then it is in our best interest to keep him alive." Snape rose to his feet and caught himself before his hands brushed down his robes. It was a nervous habit from his childhood that he had thought quite gone. It hadn't. Once again the Headmaster had found another way to unsettle him, and he had an urgent need to leave the older man's presence. He moved to the door which creaked slowly open for him. "I need to be about my rounds, Headmaster."

"Of course, Severus. Good evening." The older wizard turned back to the Mirror of Erised, contemplating, perhaps, its broken surface.

"Headmaster?" Snape stood in the doorway as Dumbledore turned away towards his Potions professor. "I will find out if Harry has the Stone."

Dumbledore only nodded, and turned away. Snape strode from the Mirror Room, quelling a very childish desire to run down the corridor and down to the comforting depths of his dungeons.

That night Snape tossed and turned in his large bed as he regretted, for once, that he did not have the comfort of a companion to hold

onto. Sneering at himself, at that point, he threw off the covers, almost viciously, and slipped from his bed. He put on his dressing gown and slippers against the chill and padded, very softly, out to his sitting room. With a quick wave of his wand, the fire rose up in the fireplace, its crackling flames beginning to take the chill out of the air. He settled into his favourite chair, his shoulders slumping as he stretched his long legs out until his feet were being warmed by the fire.

"Twinkling eyes," he muttered to himself, his brow frowning with disgust. Voice Magic, and now that blasted twinkle! Snape had always thought it a simple, rather annoying, affectation that was another mark of how dreadfully cheerful the old man could get, sometimes. Now, Snape mumbled to the flames as he leaned the left side of his jaw into the palm of his left hand, "it is something more insidious."

Really, should I be so surprised? Snape asked himself bitterly. The persuasive power of Voice Magic should have at least warned him when he finally figured that one out. The Headmaster was always manipulating everyone and Snape realised now that it was more than just gentle words the old coot could use.

Snape would no longer let his guard down around the Headmaster. There was every possibility that Dumbledore had other forms of Persuasive Magic at his beck and call if he had both that stupid twinkle, and the Voice Magic.

"Blasted twinkle!" he grouched, grinding his teeth darkly. "I never suspected it. Never."

Snape stiffened as he caught movement from his door as it swung quietly open, paused, and then closed. Lowering his eyesight, he relaxed as he saw who wandered softly into his quarters. A tousel-haired little boy was rubbing one fist against his eyes, and then let out a yawn as he padded over to his father in bare feet. Harry was also missing his robe.

Snape let out a sigh, grasped his son under the arms before he could lean against the chair, and drew the boy up into his lap.

"Hey!" protested Harry, but not very much. "I'm too old for being held, Dad!"

"You might be, but tonight, I am not," harrumphed Snape into the flame lit darkness of the small sitting room. With a wave of his hand, Harry's father Summoned the afghan draped over the back of the sofa, and then draped it over his son, making sure that it covered his bare feet, too.

With his son's legs draped across his lap and the boy's side leaning into his stomach and chest, Snape lightly pushed Harry's head against his shoulder, taking a moment to run his fingers through the soft hair. Harry let out a sigh, and another yawn.

"What are you doing here, Harry?" Snape asked in a whisper that rumbled comfortingly in his chest. Harry shrugged and snuggled a bit closer to his father. "It was not due to a nightmare, was it?"

Snape could feel Harry's head shake, just a small bit. "Mum sent me," Harry finally whispered back. "I woke up an' just kind of had a thought that Mum was telling me to come see you." Harry lifted his head just as his father looked down at him. Harry's tired expression was filled with concern. "You okay, Dad?"

Snape smiled, just that tiny bit that Harry was comfortable with and knew hid a much bigger smile inside his father's heart. Harry smiled back and Snape cupped the little boy's cheek. "I am feeling better now, Harry."

Harry relaxed, then, and closed his eyes. When Snape heard the long, relaxed breaths of sleep, the older wizard put aside the last of his worries and concerns over Dumbledore and closed his own eyes.

A/N: An anonymous reviewer raised a valid concern about Harry and flashbacks, and whether what he felt/recalled when Snape smacked Hermione was a true flashback. A person or child suffering from post traumatic stress disorder, of which Harry is dealing with, recovers from PTSD many ways. It is not simple to treat, and what works for one child, may not for another. I have had flashbacks for over 20 years, now, and I am 48. They are like what Harry experienced: a similar incident triggers an old memory of abuse. I am set off by similar incidents, and odors. So, yes, kind reader, Harry did suffer a flashback.

I do hope you enjoyed this chapter. I know my chapters are long, and they have a lot going on in them, so if you feel I've missed something that should be addressed, don't hesitate to ask me. I have no beta for this story, so it can be daunting to keep track of it all.

Things to come: A meeting with Hermione, a small field trip to Malfoy Manor, the Malfoys Winter Ball, and Christmas.



Sunday, Nov. 17, 1991

The very next morning, after breakfast, Hermione was summoned from her dorm to her Head of House's office. They had all just settled down in their common room to finish up their homework assignments for the weekend. As Hermione let out a sigh, she packed away her inkwell, quills, parchment, and textbooks, and then asked that the boys watch her bag for her. Harry adamantly shook his head.

"I think we oughta go with you, 'Mione," Harry glanced at Draco who nodded in the affirmative.

She smiled at her friends, and watched as they packed up their supplies, too.

Upon entering Snape's office, the Potions Master was about to send Draco and Harry back to their House when Harry shook his head firmly.

"I really think me and Draco need to stay, Dad. Please? It's important." Snape considered the request, and then finally nodded curtly. He conjured two more chairs, more comfortable than the normal straight-backed wooden ones he kept in his office for his students, and then he Transfigured the two uncomfortable ones to match the new ones.

Snape then ordered tea and Digestible biscuits that were laced with a Calming Potion. He knew that Hermione would not take well the news of her parents arrest and didn't want to load up her stomach with something that would upset it. He almost thought to give the boys something else to nibble on, but then decided that should they display any indignant outbursts on their friend's behalf, the biscuits would temper the worst of such emotion.

The Floo in Snape's office then whooshed green and Lucius stepped through. He removed the soot from his clothing with a swish of his wand and smiled when he heard, "Papa! What are you doing here?"

Draco rushed to his father's side, but halted just short of giving him a quick hug. Lucius was allowing his son to show him more of his affectionate nature, but when others were around, Draco still

hesitated. Narcissa had explained to her husband that their son was at that age where he wanted hugs from his parents, but he was beginning to feel, at least in front of his friends, that he was too old for such a show. Lucius removed the glove from one hand and touched his son's cheek in place of a hug. Draco grinned happily, and then moved back to sit beside Hermione.

"I've come for tea," Lucius answered his son's question as he removed his other glove and then his robe which Snape took and put on the clothes tree. He then seated himself opposite the children.

"Is mother all right?" asked Draco conversationally.

"She had a long night helping Professor Snape and I with a problem so she is still abed," replied Lucius as he took the cup of tea that Snape offered. "I think your mother would welcome a Floo call from you later today, Dragon."

Draco nodded firmly. "Sure, Papa."

Silence then fell a bit awkwardly until Snape cleared his throat for attention. His gaze dropped to Hermione. "Miss Granger, a letter came for you last Monday, and due to circumstances you were unable to read it. Prefect Anglaise found the letter and wisely brought it to me."

"Who was it from, sir?" she asked with trepidation.

"Jean and George Granger," it was Lucius who spoke. Hermione noticed that her sponsor had not called them her parents, and this began a tiny seed of worried panic fluttering just beneath her breastbone.

"Wh-what did they... should I read the..." Hermione's Head of House shook his head slowly, and she could only swallow dryly.

Snape added to his negative, silent response, "I do feel it would be to your benefit to read their letter, Miss Granger... but not at this time."

Harry gripped Hermione's left hand when she sniffled, and Draco gently laced his fingers in his friend's right hand. "Please, sir,"

Hermione whispered hoarsely, "I don't want to read it, but did they... can you tell me what they said?"

Snape stiffened, and his expression was like stone. His eyes burned, though, with the disapproval he felt for the child's inadequate parents. "Jean and George Granger have agreed that neither of them can come to terms with having a magical child." Tears began to silently course down Hermione's cheeks. "I am afraid that I must also inform you, Miss Granger, that this is not a simple business. Due to neglect, and a..." furtively the dark eyes flicked over to Lucius. The older man nodded once. "I am very sorry to inform you, Hermione, that Jean Granger attempted to replace you with a child that had been kidnapped. This was discovered yesterday when I and the Malfoys went to investigate the situation."

Hermione let out a gasp of shock and disbelief. Deep down she had always known her mother had disapproved of her, had been disappointed, and it had been even worse after she received her Hogwarts letter. Her father, who really had been an apathetic source, had actively begun to avoid her. That hurt, and it would probably hurt for a long time, but she was appalled that another child had had to suffer because of her.

"I'm so sorry," she mumbled sadly. "I never meant to hurt them like this. To make them take someone else's daughter? I am so sorry," she apologised.

"What is this?" demanded Lucius. Hermione glanced over at her sponsor, the elegant gentleman who wrote to her once a week with questions about her studies, who had come with his wife to visit her in the Infirmary, and had even sent her a Howler. Lucius had been more a father to her in the short time as her sponsor than her own flesh and blood had been. And, like a father, he was indignant on her behalf. "You will not blame yourself for the inadequacies and deficiencies of these people who should have been more than just parents to you, Hermione." His silvery-grey eyes flashed like diamonds and his cane cracked once on the floor, startling them all.

A grimace set on his face, it crumbled briefly as Lucius saw Hermione's quiet tears, and the confusion, and pain, all written in her features. He held out his arms and beckoned. With a squeeze of hands from Draco and Harry, they let go, and Hermione ran to

Lucius Malfoy. He scooped the little girl up into his lap. Hermione buried her head in his shoulder and let more tears fall.

"You are a treasure, my girl," he said softly into her bushy hair. "They were thoughtless, cruel, and selfish and do not deserve a child as bright, and as lovely as you are."

"No. They don't." Hermione's voice was hard, for just a moment, and then she broke down into fresh tears.

For several long moments the atmosphere was uneasy in the Potions Master's office as the little girl cried. Harry fidgeted, tried to stay still, and then gave up. He left his chair, and despite the hard expression on his father's face, he leaned against the older man. Snape kept his eyes on Hermione, but his arm did drift over Harry's shoulder.

Draco felt at a loss once Harry went to his father. Draco glanced at his father, whose concentration was on Hermione, and then he looked to Harry, and he felt just a bit jealous. To his surprise, Snape let out an aggrieved sigh, and motioned for the boy to come over to his other side. Draco nearly jumped from his chair, and settled happily against his teacher's free side. It was even better when a heavy arm draped comfortingly over his shoulders.

Hermione's tears, her grief at the fact that her parents not only didn't want her anymore, was a little more bearable now. Not easy to listen to, but waiting for her waterworks to stop wasn't as hard. Harry and Draco were more patient, and when Snape noted that the tell-tale hitching in Hermione's voice held an end to the current bout of tears, he nudged the two boys back to their chairs.

Hermione felt awful-awful, but she also felt terrible because Lucius, such an impeccable dresser, was the recipient of "kid muck" on his clothing. She started to apologise for that, but he Scourgified away the tears, and other mess on his shoulder, and conjured a handkerchief for Hermione to clean her face.

"What's going to happen to them?" Hermione asked Lucius, as she looked up into his face with red-rimmed eyes.

It was Snape who answered that question. "Jean Granger is being brought up on charges for complicity in the felony of a kidnapping.

After her interview, they added charges of neglect. George Granger was also charged with neglect, but it is doubtful he will serve any time."

Hermione nodded her head, still facing Lucius. The finger on her left hand was tracing the silver and emerald snake brooch he always wore on the lapel of his suit jackets.

The girl then asked, "What about me? What's going to happen to me?" Her voice sounded very small, and worried.

Again, it was Snape who gave the answer, his tone cold, dry, and matter-of-fact. "For now, Hermione Granger has gone missing. It will be discovered in a few months time that she died from exposure after running away."

Hermione was quiet for a long moment. She turned slightly on Lucius' lap as she eyed him, then Harry, then Draco, and then Snape. After twice more glancing between the wizards, she spoke, her voice sounded lost, "I won't ever be able to go back? To the Muggle world?"

Lucius slowly shook his head. "Do you wish to go back?" he then asked.

Hermione was clearly conflicted. Her confusion made her seem so much younger than her eleven years. Regardless of how terrible her parents had been to her, she did still love them. It also hurt, a dull throb in her chest, that they had so easily rid themselves of her.

Suddenly tired, Hermione didn't want to do anything more than sleep for a very long time. She leaned against Lucius' chest, grasping the edge of his robes, and drawing them over her face. As she drew in the clean scent of vetiver from his robes, and the scent of soap, Hermione imagined herself being very small. In her drifting thoughts she imagined being protected, cared for, truly loved.

Lucius stood up, cradling the child to his chest. Snape seemed to understand what was needed and revealed the hidden door in his office to his private quarters. He opened it.

"Harry, show Mr. Malfoy to your bedroom so your friend may get some rest," ordered Snape quietly.

"Sure thing, Dad. C'mon, Mr. Malfoy." With Harry leading the way, the patrician, holding the girl, vanished into the short corridor that led to Snape and Harry's quarters.

Once Harry saw that Hermione was curled up on his bed, he gave her back a gentle pat, and then ran back to his father's office. Lucius sat on the edge of the bed, his hand rubbing feather-light circles upon Hermione's back. He frowned as the anger at the Grangers rose up into his gullet. He wanted to hex them a dozen times over, and then do so again. He just could not understand how parents could do what they had done to their child?

Voldemort was clearly insane, but Lucius had to admit that one thing he had to agree with was that the wizarding world had to remain separate from that of the Muggle world. No matter how advanced the Muggles might be, they still feared and despised true magic; thus hurting innocent children with their insecurities.

Hermione, tired as she was, couldn't sleep. She couldn't cry, either. Maybe because she was out of tears. Uncle Lucius' gentle touch on her back was comforting and she hoped he wouldn't go away. At least, not for awhile, yet.

"Hermione, do you think you are able to answer the question I asked?" a little nod answered him. "I believe someday, should you wish to return to the Muggle world, you may return, just not as yourself. However, for now, as you grow, and learn more of your magic, would you still wish to go back to that world?"

"No," she replied. Her voice was soft, but her answer was firm. "But where will I live?" Hermione asked plaintively into the pillow. "At Hogwarts?"

Lucius turned the girl onto her back so she was looking up at him. He touched her cheek with the back of his fingers. Hermione noted that this was just the same, affectionate gesture that he used with his son. A smile broke across her face.

"Malfoy Manor has plenty of room for another child, Hermione," Lucius began, his face serious, but his silvery-grey gaze smiling. "I also have a suspicion that Cissy would love to have a daughter.

What do you think, child?" he asked solemnly. "Would you consent to being a Malfoy?"

Hermione wanted to reply at once, but she thought, first, of Draco. "Do you think Draco would mind?"

"Dragon thinks the world of you, my dear, and I've no doubt he would be the most protective brother in the world," Lucius replied.

It was the right thing for the wizard to say for Hermione sat up and threw her arms around his neck. She whispered against him, happily, "Yes! I want to be yours, please!"

Lucius held the child, his little girl! Imagine that! A few more minutes and then settled her back down on the bed and tucked her beneath the covers. Before he was even finished smoothing the blankets, Hermione had slipped into a comfortable slumber. With no intention of leaving, Lucius Summoned the small child's chair at Harry's desk, enlarged it and made it a bit more comfortable, and then seated himself. He would stay put until Hermione woke up.

Just in time for lunch, Hermione woke and was comforted at seeing Lucius sitting beside the bed. As she sat up, he used his wand to iron out a few wrinkles from her robes and then sent her into the bathroom to freshen herself.

Snape had provided lunch for the Silver Trio and himself and Lucius, but he wouldn't let anyone dig into the repast right away. The reason became clear when the Floo whooshed into green and Narcissa Malfoy stepped from the green flames.

"Mother!" Draco smiled and rose to greet his mother with an enthusiastic hug. When he pulled away, he was grinning smugly. "Guess what?"

Narcissa had a fair idea of what the surprise was, so she quickly glanced at her husband. A brush of Lucius' hand to Hermione's cheek as she sat beside him, confirmed what she suspected. She looked down at her son and asked, "I haven't the faintest idea what your surprise might be, Dragon. Would you tell me?"

Draco's smug grin turned into a bright smile as Harry snickered quietly as he sat beside his father. "Hermione's gonna be my sister!"

Narcissa smiled brightly. "Now that is wonderful news, Dragon." The beautiful witch went over to Hermione, then bent and kissed Hermione's forehead. "I could not ask for a more lovely daughter than you, dear."

After lunch Snape and Lucius sent the children off with Narcissa to explore some areas of the castle that the patrician witch knew of that would entertain the children.

"Can't you come, Dad?" Harry had asked. It seemed like such a family outing that he wanted his family to come along.

Snape gripped Harry's shoulder gently in regret as he shook his head. "We'll have to do something together another day, son. I and Lucius have things to discuss."

Harry had been disappointed, but he had nodded and left without argument.

Just as Snape escorted Lucius back to his quarters where he knew they would have more secure privacy, an owl arrived in the office. Snape took the Muggle looking envelope from the bird, and glanced at a rather official looking logo; it was from Scotland Yard. Taking the letter with him, the two wizards retreated to Snape's private rooms where the first thing he did was read the letter. Most of the letter was typed, except for a handwritten note at the end.

Saturday, 1991 November 16

Professor Severus Snape,

This is to pass onto you the courtesy of information about one, Vernon Alan Dursley of Little Whinging, London, late of HM Prison Brixton.

At cell lockdown at 5pm on Thursday, 1991 November 14, just after dinner, as the guard did a prisoner count, it was discovered that Vernon Alan Dursley had gone missing. The entire prison went on lockdown, but not for long as the body of Vernon Alan Dursley was found in the prison shower. His body had been beaten and defiled. A plank of wood had been tied by prison twine around his neck that said, 'For the kids, you bastard'.



Subsequent investigation revealed that Vernon Alan Dursley had bragged about several boys that he had hurt and how he was angry that he had never gotten to do the same to his nephew. He had vowed, several times, that once he had served his sentence, he would find his nephew, and kill him.

The men in Brixton are hardly a sterling lot, Professor Snape, but there exists a large group that consider children as the innocents of the world, and to be avenged, by them. This was their justice.

Sincerely,

Detective Aloysius M. Stanley

Scotland Yard

Handwritten note: As to the matter we discussed, I shall keep you and Mr. Malfoy updated. AMS.

After some silence between the two men, Lucius asked, "Will you tell Harry?"

Snape folded the letter and put it into a box that he sealed and placed upon his tallest bookshelf away from inquisitive, little boys. "I will tell him that his uncle has died, but not the circumstances. When he is older, and if he asks, I will speak to him, then, about the," Snape grimaced, "proclivities of the sick man."

The Potions Master prepared them each a drink and then they settled in the twin wingback chairs in front of the fire. After several sips of the Elven Brandy, Snape inquired, "Is the detective able to accept any remuneration for his services, Lucius?"

Lucius smirked, "I pay him quite well, Severus. If you feel the need to acknowledge Stanley's good work, I understand he has quite a passion for good cigars, on occasion."

Snape nodded, before losing himself for a moment in the flames of the fireplace. His thoughts were now entirely upon his son, who still had nightmares, who still flinched from most people, who chose to stand behind those he trusted when encountering new people. Despite these negative things, Harry had found things to laugh at,

he had his two best friends, and although he wasn't a great student, he did put in a good effort where his homework, and wand work was concerned.

Dursley was permanently gone from the boy's life. Now they needed to deal with things more sinister; the Dark Lord, the Philosopher's Stone, and Albus Dumbledore.

"I have discovered there is greater reason to never meet the Headmaster's gaze," remarked Snape as one long, tapered finger traced the rim of his brandy glass. Lucius glanced away from the fire to his friend, and listened. "That bloody twinkle in his eyes that I've always hated is much more than just a doddering fool's happy twinkle." He took a sip of the brandy. "Just as Dumbledore is able to influence people with Voice Magic, his twinkle calms people; including people that are holding a wand to his face."

Lucius' eyes widened. "Did you try to hex the old bastard, Severus?"

Snape then told Lucius of his meeting with the Headmaster in the Mirror Room. He also told the slightly older wizard about the mirror being broken, and that Dumbledore had had some fool idea to hide the Philosopher's Stone within it.

"Add to that, Lucius, this tidbit of knowledge," seethed Snape. "That old goat knew that Voldemort possessed Quirrell when he hired him."

Lucius' hand gripped so tightly upon his brandy glass, reflecting his sudden burst of anger, that the glass shattered. The remains of the brandy spattered his robes, as did blood from his hand, pierced by small slivers of glass.

"Merlin's toad, Lucius!" Snape jumped up, vanished the broken glass and brandy remains, and carefully took hold of the other wizard's hand. Using his wand, he vanished three slivers embedded in Lucius' palm. He cast a simple Diagnostic Spell, and then examined the wounds with his eyes. When he didn't see any other glints of glass, he healed the small wounds and then cleaned away the blood.

Lucius watched the healing as his gaze boiled with anger. "Our sons. My, my daughter." His other hand gripped into a tight fist and he

pounded his fist once on the arm of the chair. "I will kill that old bastard myself for putting my children in harm's way, Severus."

"And I would join you in an instant, Lucius," agreed Severus as he returned to his chair. "The problem is that we do not have any evidence against Dumbledore that the Ministry would accept, and it is the Ministry with a vote from the Wizengamot that would have to remove the old man. The Board of Governors..."

Lucius nodded and finished, "...are impotent as far as ousting a Headmaster is concerned."

"Dumblarse has a fine position of passive power at Hogwarts and I have never seen how insidious it is," grouched Snape.

"He will bring harm to Harry, Severus," Lucius warned. The dark haired man glowered at his friend. "I realise you are very aware of this, but you have implied that he is following the very same prophecy that Voldemort was obsessed with. Whether or not we consider it nonsense, the power of a self-fulfilling prophecy is deadly. The destruction it has already caused..."

"I know!" snapped the Potions Master angrily. "I also know that Dumbledore is far too clever to be caught by trouble the Ministry would frown upon. No one there cares to believe that Voldemort did not truly die that night, Lucius. As for the Philosopher's Stone, only I, you, Harry, the Headmaster, and more than likely Voldemort himself, knows of it."

"Where are the Flamels?" asked Lucius.

Snape shook his head. "According to Dumbledore, once they released the Stone, they died not long after. Since the wizarding world never knew of their longevity, I doubt anyone would understand the danger the Stone is."

"Dumbledore Legilimensed your son," Lucius persisted. He needed something concrete to bring the Headmaster to the Board of Governors for at least a recommendation of removal from Hogwarts.

Once again the Potions Master shook his head, "Only a skilled Legilimens can reveal the transgressions of another Legilimens and

the way the law is concerning Dark Magic, of which Legilimens is considered, I would be headed to Azkaban along with Dumbledore."

"So, all we have are accusations and not a shred of evidence," Lucius grit his teeth with renewed anger. "And you say that bloody Stone is what? Singing to Voldemort?" Snape merely nodded. Lucius' lips thinned. "I do not like this, Severus."

"Nor do I," sighed Snape. "For now, continue your research on how we might destroy Vold..."

Lucius interrupted. "There might be something, Severus." Snape was duly attentive. "According to one of the Journals of Grindlewald, there was an object called the Hourglass of Anubis that may be of use to us in ultimately ridding our world of Voldemort, if we can find it."

"And what might that do?" asked Snape. He was not at all surprised that Lucius was in possession of Gellert Grindlewald's journals. Lucius' collection of obscure was extensive and included a large library of rare and thought to be destroyed tomes. It was a collection that if some in the Ministry knew of what it contained, would destroy it, and others would, such as the Unspeakables, would keep it for themselves.

"The god supposedly used it to judge the souls that came before him after crossing the Veil. If the hourglass turned one way, then the soul was judged worthy to proceed to the afterlife. If the hourglass turned the other way, the soul was judged damned, drawn into the hourglass, where it was destroyed by the Dead Sands," Lucius described, rather simply.

"It might destroy Quirrell," observed Snape.

Lucius shook his head slowly, "Only if Quirrell's soul were deemed unworthy. Also, as Quirrell is not technically dead, his soul may not be at all touched."

"The Hourglass of Anubis sounds promising, but did Grindlewald ever find it?" asked Snape.

"He didn't, which, I suppose, in the long run is a good thing." Lucius shrugged. "If we could find it..."

"Have you come across anything that tells you where it might be?" Snape asked, somewhat testily.

Lucius smirked at the young wizard. "As of yet, no. However, Grindlewald's journal mentions a scroll that was written by Imhotep during the construction of the pyramid at Saqqara. Grindlewald wrote that the scroll details a number of artefacts that were discovered buried deeply in the sand and sealed within a gold chest that was decorated with images of Anubis judging the souls of the dead. I have determined that the scroll does exist and I expect it to be delivered to me within a month."

Snape silently hoped that Lucius' search would end well, but it was obvious that it would take time. This worried the Potions Master. "Should Quirrell recover from his coma, we will have to find another way to deal with him, Lucius. I do not want that man back in the position of teaching again."

For a silent moment Lucius drummed the fingers of one hand upon the arm of his chair. His eyes then narrowed with calculating thought. "It is not well that Madame Pomfrey is the fort between Dumbledore and Quirrell, my friend. Not that I ever had any trust in that old man, but if we are to be the architects that interfere with his shady plans, we must know that Quirrell is safe from his machinations, and within our hands."

Snape had listened carefully to his friend's deliberation and had nodded during it in agreement. He then smiled thinly. "I have a thought, but we will require Poppy's assistance as it will need the professor's disappearance."

Lucius' smile was very pleased knowing that Snape's thought had triggered one of his own, many secrets. "Speak to her, then, Severus. What may I do to help?"

Snape rose from his chair. "Give me a moment with the good matron." Snape then went over to his fireplace, threw in a handful of Floo powder, and beckoned Poppy to come and join them. The matron was free, at the moment, so she came through, dusted non-existent soot from her apron (the elves kept the internal Floos very clean) and settled herself, with a straight spine, upon the sofa.

Poppy listened closely to her part needed in the plan to effect Quirrell's vanishment, gave her enthusiastic acceptance, and returned to the Infirmary, where she would wait until the plan was put into effect.

Wednesday, Nov. 20, 1991

Snape strode upwards from the dungeons during his free period, and to the tower that was the Deputy Head's office. Upon reaching the suit of armor that guarded Lupin's door, the Potions Master glared at it. The armor let out a short growl and Snape merely deepened his glare at the impertinently animated suit of metal. The armor stepped aside and Lupin's door opened, allowing him to enter.

"Severus, what good is it if I set a password and you never use it?" asked Lupin, as he smiled tiredly from a comfortable chair by his fireplace.

"Considering that suit of armor was once the King of all England I would think, Lupin, he would be more aggressive than he is to bow to a simple glare," scoffed Snape.

"You threatened to melt Henry the last time he wouldn't move, Severus," Lupin chuckled half-heartedly and then leaned his head on the palm of his hand. His eyes closed as he grimaced.

"The joint pain, Lupin?" asked Snape knowledgeably as he took the chair opposite.

Lupin did not open his eyes. "It's been years since I've had to deal with it, Severus. I wish..."

Snape smirked, "Careful what you wish for, wolf." Lupin's eyes opened and he saw that the Potions Master was holding up a familiar looking grey bottle that had a rather ornate label in French on it.

"D'Lisle's Wolfsbane, Severus?" Lupin gasped as he sat up straighter.

Snape handed the potion over. "Only for this full moon, Lupin. I ordered two doses along with the ingredients I needed from D'Lisle."

Lupin drank down the heavy potion until the bottle was empty. "I have to compensate you for this, Severus." He smiled as the potion began to soothe away the aches in his joints, and the headache that had begun; all symptoms that hailed the onset of Lupin's change at the full moon on the twenty-first.

"If you wish to pay someone back, speak to the Headmaster, Lupin," replied Snape. "In agreeing to your position, I made it a requirement that Dumbledore would pay for the ingredients for your potion. And not the cheap ingredients." He watched critically as the wizard leaned his head back finally feeling the last of his symptoms fading away. After several minutes of quiet, Snape asked, "Lupin, tomorrow... where will you go?"

Lupin took a moment to reply. When he did he opened his eyes and looked into the flames roaring in the fireplace. "Albus told me that he renewed the wards on the Shrieking Shack. I suppose I will go there."

Snape grimaced at the memory of the tunnel of roots created by the Whomping Willow that led up to the door leading into the Shrieking Shack. It made him shudder. That old fear made him wonder at his thinking as he offered, "The Shrieking Shack is a rude and cold place to be, even for a wolf in winter. You may sleep in my sitting room before the fire."

Lupin, who had been about to close his eyes again, opened them in astonishment. He stared incredulously at the man before him. He did not see a jest in Snape's body language, nor was he able to scent deceit over the offer. Even so, Lupin was still taken aback by what the dour Potions Master had just offered.

"That's very kind of you, Severus, but the Shrieking Shack..." He stopped speaking as Snape abruptly rose from his chair and strode to the Deputy's office door.

"I am curious to witness your transformation from wizard to wolf, Lupin," Snape spoke briskly as he opened the door. "In doing so, I may garner some ideas for improvements to the Wolfsbane. My sitting room," Snape declared decisively. "After dinner." Before Lupin could even reply, the Potions Master was gone.

Lupin then smiled at his empty office. "Well, then. Thank you, Professor Snape."

Snape shook his head over what he'd just done. He had not only purchased Wolfsbane for Lupin (although it wasn't on his knut) but he had. Then he invited the wizard to his sitting room, and then ordered it. He truly did have a curiosity about Lupin's full transformation from man to wolf that the Wolfsbane effected, but he had seen the beast Lupin became without that miracle elixir. For years that sight had plagued his nightmares; it still did.

A deep, viscerally afraid part of himself wanted to return to the Deputy Head's office and tell the wizard to take himself to the Shrieking Shack and to not come within a mile of his quarters. The more calm, Slytherin side reminded himself that Lupin, an ally, mind you, had transformed, through Wolfsbane, the entire time he worked for Lord Mortimer's family. Quite remarkable of the parents to allow their children around the man, but Lupin, and the Lord and Lady Mortimer had been extremely diligent in making certain Lupin took his Wolfsbane at the appointed time before each full moon. Snape knew this because he had written to Lady Mortimer the moment he had a chance, and she had explained all of this in her letter.

Snape chuckled as he recalled the woman's rather admonishing tone as her words reminded him that 'Remus Lupin never asked for this curse and it is up to those of us that respect this, and Remus, that we help him however is needed'.

As the Potions Master took a hidden corridor down past the moving staircases, he avoided any unwelcome gossip from students that might be lurking and curious about his own perambulations right before curfew.

He had been more receptive to, of all things, a friendship with the man he had been afraid of nearly all of his life. Snape supposed it had greatly helped to know that Lupin had had a falling out with Sirius Black, which then meant in his leaving the main prankster there would be no more contact with James Potter or the sycophantic Peter Pettigrew. Such a move had terminated the acquisition of new friends, but his Head of House, according to what Lupin had imparted, had invited the quiet and reserved student to tea.



Snape had no doubt that Minerva had been fishing for just what the event was that broke up the Marauders, but Lupin would never tell anyone for fear of revealing his hidden nature. Despite what Minerva's motives originally had been she had discovered that the young man had a talent for Transfiguration and so she became his mentor until his last day at Hogwarts. Lupin was then thrust out of the safety of Hogwarts where he had to find employment; not all that difficult since he remained an unregistered 'Dark Creature'. The problem was that Lupin was not comfortable in the wizarding world, and when the opportunity with the Mortimers (at Minerva's dabbling) had come, the position offered the young man the escape he desired.

It still astounded Snape that the Mortimers' had so thoroughly embraced what the wizarding world would have shunned, and boxed in with so many restrictions and regulations. They had actually allowed their children contact with the quiescent wolf, who became very much like a sibling to the four youngest Mortimers'.

A friendship? Snape's thoughts nearly fell over themselves in astonishment. This is the werewolf you speak of, his thoughts pressed as the smirk, that even now rested on his lips as he strode through the halls of Hogwarts, was his only answer.

With Dumbledore's secrets and Quirrell, and the Philosopher's Stone roaming around Hogwarts, Snape reasoned that his own shadowed plans would require Lupin. If the wizard would wish to return to the Muggle world later, Snape would hardly stand in the man's way, but for now, he had become a vital component.

But a friend of Lupin's? Utterly daft, shouted those other thoughts. Snape had to, albeit reluctantly, agree. He smirked, again, as those thoughts wandered off to the depths of his past, assuaged, by his own clever deceit.

"Severus! There you are!"

Snape was so startled by the voice that had interrupted his thoughts, that he very nearly collided with the owner, Madame Pomfrey. Before he could ask what the matter was, she had grasped him by the hand like a small child and dragged him down and into the Infirmary.

The 'problem' was evident the moment he entered and Poppy let go of his hand. Sitting up against plumped up pillows and appearing rather dazed, was Quirrell. His unfocused gaze settled on the medi-witch as his hand scratched at his stubbled skull.

"I sh-sh-should have m-m-my turban?" he asked, sounding incredibly lost.

Poppy patted his hand as she drew it back down into his lap. "I'll have an elf bring some clothing to you, Professor Quirrell," she spoke patiently.

The once comatose wizard was about to lean back against his pillows when his gaze spied Snape standing at the Infirmary doors. Only for a second was there a flash of deep maroon in the weak gaze, and then it was gone. It was enough to propel Snape several steps backwards so that his back banged up against the Infirmary doors. Snape received a second, unwelcome shock, as two aged hands clamped down upon his shoulders and then gently moved him aside. A slight turn had the Potions Master glancing at the Headmaster coming through the Infirmary doors. As the man was smiling, Snape avoided a direct look into the orbs he knew were twinkling.

Dumbledore headed over to Quirrell, who sat up at the Headmaster's approach, and did not even flinch as the old man sat down on the edge of the bed and gathered the younger wizard's hands into his.

"It is so good to see you back with us, Quirinus," gushed the Headmaster. "How are you feeling, dear boy?" Snape sneered at the false endearment.

"F-f-fine, Headm-m-master. I just wish t-t-to return to m-m-my quarters," stammered the young man.

Dumbledore smiled pleasantly. "All in good time, Quirinus." Dumbledore glanced over where Poppy was at her potions cabinet. "Madame Pomfrey?"

"Yes, Headmaster," she replied as she held two potion bottles and returned to Quirrell's side.

"How is our young man?" asked Dumbledore solicitously.

"Perfect, Headmaster," she replied flatly. "I can detect nothing untoward except for a small nutritional deficit in his minerals and vitamins which are normal for an extended coma." She handed over a nutritional potion that was heavy in those lack of vitamins and minerals, which the patient dutifully drank down. The other potion was an electrolyte potion that was also necessary for patients who had come out of a coma.

Dumbledore nodded and returned his attention to the DADA professor. "Quirinus, my boy, I wonder if you might recall what it was that brought you to this state?"

"I-I-I..." the wizard's voice faltered and his gaze clouded with an evident loss of significant memory. "I was gr-gr-grading tests, w-w-wasn't I?" Wrenching his hands from the Headmaster, he dropped his head, rather a bit too dramatically, thought Snape, into his hands and wept silently.

Snape stifled a smirk as he caught the medi-witch's eye-roll. She thought Quirrell was being melodramatic as well. Snape then nodded, adding a slight twitch to the left with his head; a pre-arranged signal between himself and Poppy that the plan to cause Quirrell's disappearance had to proceed, at once, with this new development.

"Give me a moment, Headmaster, Professor Quirrell," said Madame Pomfrey politely. "I need to speak a moment to Severus about Harry."

Dumbledore lifted his head to look towards the Potions teacher, seemingly in concern. Quirrell's gaze was more intense as he, too, wanted to hear about the young boy.

"Merely a cold that has been unduly stubborn, Headmaster," Snape added swiftly, with no hesitation in the lie. "I wish to speak to Poppy about a possible improvement in the Pepper-Up Potion."

The Headmaster nodded a little imperiously with permission for the younger wizard to do so, and returned his attention to Quirrell while Poppy and Snape moved to Poppy's office to speak.

"Severus, this complicates matters," whispered Poppy as quietly as possible since they could not risk casting a Silencing Spell and thus alerting the two wizards to any subterfuge going on between them.

"On the contrary, Poppy. This lends more credence to the memory Lucius manufactured for you. It moves up our plans, but so much the better this is done before the holidays. Normally, how soon would you be releasing him?"

"I do require twenty-four hours observance, so that will not appear out of the norm if I detain him," she replied softly.

Snape removed a potion from his pocket and slipped it to the medi-witch. "Stupefy him as soon as the Headmaster leaves, Poppy, and then spell the entire contents of this bottle into him."

She glanced at the pale lavender potion that seemed almost alive in the bottle. "This is Mind Sleep Potion?" Poppy asked very quietly.

Snape gave a sharp nod, then touched the older woman's arm gently. Leaning close, he whispered, "Be cautious, Poppy." He then spun, and left the office. The next step in their plans would not be pleasant.

An hour later, in the midst of Potions, Snape looked up from his desk just as a memo, in the shape of a flying crane, flew into the dungeon classroom. He caught the memo, unfolded it, and read it. He crumpled the paper and it turned to ash in his hand. A few students, curious, glanced up from the Potions they were brewing.

"Mr. Longbottom! Be careful with that cricket leg!" Snape admonished sharply.

Neville's head jerked down to his cauldron just as his partner, Hermione Granger, slapped the cricket leg from his hand. "Hermione!" he protested. "I wasn't going to toss it in. I just wanted to grind it up."

Hermione smiled apologetically. "Sorry, Neville."

He glowered, but then smiled as he picked up the cricket leg and dropped it into his mortar. "You know I'm better, Hermione. I haven't exploded a cauldron in ages!"

Once the class was over, Snape nearly ran up to the Infirmary. Poppy was seated beside the bed where Quirrell slept. "How long will that potion last, Severus?" asked Poppy.

"It will keep its effectiveness until I administer the neutralising agent." He ran a Diagnostic Spell. "Did you have any trouble, Poppy?"

Madame Pomfrey shook her head. "I am a medi-witch, Severus. As far as he knew my duty was to make certain he was healthy." She scowled down at Quirrell.

Once the Potions Master was certain Quirrell would not awaken, he faced Poppy. In her hand was her wand. Her hands were trembling slightly. Snape glanced at the woman with concern.

"Poppy," he began gently, "if you're at all uncertain about this, I will find another way."

Poppy scoffed, her bravado somewhat forced. "There isn't any other way that would convince the Headmaster, Severus. You and I both know that." She watched as Snape turned slightly and then Summoned Quirrell's wand to his hand. "Just... just please be quick about it," the medi-witch's voice whispered as her bravado faded abruptly and she stood as she was ready to defend herself.

With a speed she could not have expected, Snape whipped Quirrell's wand towards Poppy. With nearly deadly calm, he shouted, "CRUCIO!"

Poppy's body buckled inwardly as all her nerve endings seem to burst into simultaneous flickers of pain. The witch fell to the floor. She hadn't wanted to scream, but the Cruciatus Curse was relentless and she could not stop the high-pitched scream that broke from the depths of her pain, and fright.

Just as quickly as he had cast the curse, Snape ended it, dropped Quirrell's wand to the floor and knelt down to Poppy's side. She was still blindly writhing on the floor as he picked up her wand, turned slightly, and cast a Blasting Curse that tore into the wall over Quirrell's bed, then shattered the tall window.

Snape then put Poppy's wand back into her hand, paused briefly, and touched his fingers to the woman's cheek. Her eyes were shut tight. Even though the Curse had only been less than a second held, and now it was ended, pain still coursed through her body.

"Forgive me, Poppy," Snape whispered, and then he brushed his lips to her forehead.

Rising to his feet and using his own wand he turned to Quirrell, Disillusioned him and Levitated the invisible wizard out of the Infirmary.

The hue and cry was raised by Argus Filch. He had cut his hand doing some clean up in the Great Hall after lunch (broken dishes that didn't make it back to the kitchen) and so he had gone to the Infirmary for treatment. It was there that he found Madame Pomfrey curled up on her side, her body trembling.

"Qui-Quirrell," she had sputtered before closing her eyes tightly once more.

Filch, forgetting about his injury, ran to the door, and stopped a group of students. "Get a teacher or the Headmaster!" he ordered with a scowl. "There's been mischief a'bad here!"

The students ran off and Filch returned to Poppy's side to see if he could help her.

By the time Filch had gotten Poppy onto a bed, the Headmaster and McGonagall were arriving.

"What has happened, Argus?" demanded Dumbledore as he went to the medi-witch's side.

"Pomfrey says it were that Quirrell fellow a'done it, Headmaster," replied Filch.

Minerva went to her friend's side and quickly ran a Diagnostic Spell. "Oh dear Merlin!" she gasped. "Albus!"

The Headmaster left Filch and went over to Minerva. He looked down at Poppy's shivering form. "Cruciatu," he murmured.

"Yes," affirmed Minerva. "What's happened Albus?" she asked as the Headmaster looked over towards Quirrell's bed. He had seen the wand of Quirrell upon the floor.

Minerva could just hear him cast *Priori Incatatem* that would tell him what spell was last cast by this wand. As a pale light came from Quirrell's wand, the Headmaster shook his head. He then pocketed the wand and moved back to Minerva and seated himself on the edge of Poppy's bed.

"My dear, can you give me the memory of what occurred?" Dumbledore asked.

Poppy simply turned her head and opened her eyes. The Headmaster's gaze caught hers and she gasped at the intrusion.

Dumbledore saw that Poppy was tending to her patient. Quirrell had asked for his wand and she showed him that it was in the bedside table. She had then departed his side to walk over to her potions cabinet. When she turned back, Quirrell was standing beside his bed, and his wand was pointed at her. Poppy stepped forward a step, and then the cold light of the *Cruciatius* Curse enveloped her. It was a moment, and she was in a great deal of pain, but even so she tried to stop Quirrell with a *Blasting* Curse. The spell flew wildly and struck the wall behind the DADA professor. He fell sideways over his bed, dropping his wand. As the window shattered, he rolled off the bed, and ran. Poppy's memory faded as her pain grew.

Dumbledore left the medi-witch's mind, unconcerned that he also left behind the ghost of a migraine, as he had done twice with Harry and his inept *Legilimens*. He looked up at Minerva. "Severus has a potion that can help her. Where is he?"

"In class," murmured Minerva. "dealing with detentions."

Dumbledore patted the older witch's hand. "Would you mind summoning him with your *Patronus*, Minerva?"

Minerva cast her *Lynx* *Patronus*, and a half an hour later, Snape had arrived. Dumbledore was now sitting in a paisley chair next to Minerva. The Potions Master ignored them both as he sat down beside Poppy, helped her to sit up, and gave her the cool, blue-

green potion he had created to treat his own body when it was subjected to the Cruciatus Curse. As it worked quickly through her system, Poppy let out a sigh.

Minerva leaned forward. "Poppy also has a migraine, Severus." She glanced wordlessly at Dumbledore. Snape grimaced in understanding and Summoned the migraine relief potion that he used. He then administered that. Poppy turned slightly, her face now a reflection of relief instead of pain.

Dumbledore stood with a smile. "Well, all is well here. I need to see if my request was answered. I've a great deal to get done before tomorrow morning." He started to leave.

"Headmaster?" queried Snape. "What happened?"

The Headmaster turned, and tried to catch his Potions professor's gaze. He found it frustrating that he could not, and probably would not any longer, be able to capture it. However, he did think it intriguing that the younger wizard was able to glare at him, without looking him directly in the eye.

"Minerva can enlighten you, Severus. I have to see to a replacement." Dumbledore gave everyone a pleasant nod, and then left.

Minerva had the events, from Dumbledore's Legilimens, related in a few minutes. They were then quiet, both sitting side-by-side as they watched over the medi-witch. After an hour, Minerva stood and touched Snape's shoulder.

"Will you stay the night and monitor the Infirmary, Severus?" He nodded. "I'll look in upon your Snakes for you."

Minerva started out of the Infirmary, but he stopped her. "If Harry asks, let him know he can visit."

"I shall."

When Minerva left the Infirmary was eerily quiet. Snape leaned over and gently brushed a few strands of greyish-blond hair from the medi-witch's cheek. She stirred, opening her eyes slowly.



"You ought to go back to sleep, Poppy," he whispered.

"Not yet, Severus." Poppy shifted her hand until it was out from under the covers. She gripped his hand that had brushed her cheek. "Is Quirrell hidden?"

Snape nodded. "No one will find him. I'll take you tomorrow to tend him." He squeezed the hand holding his. "How are you feeling, Poppy?" His soft tone was tinged heavily with contrition.

"Severus, please," she smiled sadly. "Please don't do this to yourself. It was the only way..." Poppy let go of his hand and stretched her hand up to touch his cheek.

Snape lowered his head, his long, straight hair falling to obscure his face. "I know, Poppy," his voice was brittle. "I... I despise..."

Poppy, although still feeling exhausted, sharpened her voice, "Severus Snape, stop that. This instant. I agreed to this so that I may help you to keep Harry, and all the students in this school safe. Your regret only devalues what I have done, and I find it... insulting."

Snape's head snapped up as Poppy spoke, and her hand dropped to her blanket. "Poppy! No, I..." Snape cut off any self-recrimination and wiped the apology from his face. He took a deep breath. "You are right, Poppy." Snape took another, much steadier deep breath. "Do rest well for the rest of the evening. I will monitor the Infirmary for you."

Poppy yawned, then smiled approvingly at Snape. "Good night, Severus."

Thursday, Nov. 21, 1991

Breakfast on Thursday was a morning of announcements for the students. As the Great Hall filled with hungry, some still half-asleep students, Hermione nudged Harry, causing his yawn to be interrupted as she nodded towards the staff table. "It's Tonks!" she smiled shyly at the widely smiling young Auror, whose hair was a neon blue. Tonks waved merrily at Hermione until Snape caught her hand and slapped it down to her side.

Harry smiled as the cheeky woman gave Snape a moue that was a mock of a kiss. He glared as darkly as possible in discouragement at her, then gave a sharp wave towards his gawking Silver Trio to seat themselves.

"Wonder what cousin Tonks is doing here," remarked Draco to his friends as they seated themselves at the table.

"I don't see Professor Lupin," observed Harry.

"He was sick yesterday, Harry," reminded Hermione. "The Headmaster taught DADA."

Harry grimaced. "Yeah, I remember." Harry had unfortunately become Professor Dumbledore's assistant in Defense Against the Dark Arts yesterday and had not done well in performing his basic shield. He'd forgone a visit to the Infirmary and had instead gone to his father for healing from bird pecks, boils, and a conjunctivitis spell that only hit one eye.

The Headmaster stopped all conversation by casting a Chiming Charm that caused everyones attention to focus upon the staff table. He stood and smiled at all the students.

"A moment before everyone finishes breakfast," he began. "Professor Quirrell who recovered from a malady some weeks ago has chosen to return to his research in Albania. As for Professor Lupin, news of an illness is quite premature as our esteemed Deputy Headmaster is dealing with the endless paperwork that has a tendency to increase as the holidays approach. To that end, I thought we might be at a loss for someone to teach our Defense Against the Dark Arts class, but we are fortunate to welcome Junior Auror Nymphadora Tonks for the rest of the year as your new instructor. Please make welcome, Professor Tonks."

Tonks rose to the sound of appreciative applause which caused her to change her hair from neon blue to delighted pink. As she started to wave at all the students, Snape yanked on the back of her robes sending her awkwardly back down into her chair. Snape caught the young woman before she could spill indecorously off the chair and either onto the floor, or Merlin forbid, onto the Potions Master's lap.

"You're a teacher!" hissed Snape towards the clumsy witch. "Behave like one!"

"Aww, Snapester, I didn't think you cared!" The cheeky smile faded as the most disapproving, stony glare came from Snape and she gulped silently, feeling like she was back in the older man's class. Tonks slouched down in her chair trying, vainly, to become invisible.

Snape, pleased that the young woman wasn't completely immune to his scowls, smirked smugly, and returned his attention to his morning coffee.

However clumsy or exuberant Tonks could be outside of class, she took to her professorial duties very seriously. Tonks had taken over Quirrell's vague lecture notes, Lupin's restructured practicals, and tossed out the Headmaster's decidedly mean dueling practices that picked upon students. From the mish-mosh she had, overnight, constructed a good curriculum that would carry her students through term.

For the first years she began the class with a succinct lecture and then a demo followed by a practical lesson that perfected wand movement and then technique. First year defense wasn't easy, but Tonks was a very hands on type of teacher who spent much of the class in the midst of her students instead of standing at a podium.

Draco, who was delighted to have his cousin teaching, had tried to tease her in class and had earned a ten point loss for Slytherin for doing so. He was mad, for a little while, until the practicals began and he received the same attention everyone else did. The quick hug at the end of class from his cousin didn't hurt either.

That evening of the full moon, just an hour before it appeared in the clear, wintry sky, Lupin arrived at Snape's office. Although he had taken the Wolfsbane as prescribed, a day earlier and his joints were feeling the better for it, Lupin did appear very weary and Snape had to wonder how the wizard had managed the walk from his quarters near Gryffindor to the dungeons.

Taking the man by the elbow, Snape quickly escorted the weary wolf into his quarters where he quickly cast a Muffliato Spell to quieten any undue noise, and an additional ward to seal his quarters against intruding visitors, unless it was Harry.

Within the hour Snape, across the sitting room, by his door, watched as Lupin changed from man to wolf. The Wolfsbane prevented the change from man into the fearsome werewolf that was half man, half beast that was tortured by incredible pain and mindless rage. Still, despite this, Snape admitted he was ready to dive out of his door the second it might appear that the D'Lisle Wolfsbane was a bad batch.

The Wolfsbane did work well, and within fifteen minutes a tired and quiescent timber wolf of beautiful sandy brown and grey blinked amber eyes in thankful acknowledgment to the Potions Master. Lupin the wolf settled himself upon the hearth by the fire and was soon asleep.

Snape gathered the cast off clothes of the Deputy and noticed the wear and tear they had taken. It was no wonder that Lupin's clothing, of which he couldn't afford to replace as often as he needed, generally looked tatty. He summoned a house elf, gave the clothing to the small creature who eyed the timber wolf warily, and ordered it to do any necessary repairs and cleaning and to have the clothing ready for the morning.

Friday, Nov. 22, 1991

By Friday, Tonks' teaching had put all thought of Professor Quirrell from the minds of the students. She had managed to bring an enthusiasm to the class that all the staff were remarking that they had not seen in years. Tonks herself was a bubbly, youthful addition to the meals, especially in the morning, although Snape didn't agree. It helped, very little, that the woman would insist upon sitting beside him where he had to endure the Junior Auror's clumsiness first hand. That morning he had just missed being stabbed in the face by Tonks' fork as she gestured wildly about with her hands as she described some ridiculous chase after a third rate charlatan of a wizard as one of her assignments. With a quick flick of his wand a cork was lodged sturdily over the tines of the fork, rendering it harmless. Tonks didn't notice until she tried to spear some of her scrambled eggs with the corked fork.

Filius Flitwick guffawed freely over the look on Tonks' face while she tried to wrestle the cork off the end of her fork. When it finally came off, it came off quickly. The fork flew towards Dumbledore until it trapped a good portion of his dangling beard upon the surface of the

table. Snape would have smirked at this, but Tonks' hand holding the cork had gone in the opposite direction of the fork until the back of her hand smacked into Snape's coffee cup.

The very hot liquid spilled down his chest and drenched his trousers, painfully burning the upper thigh of his right leg. He jumped up, shouting, "Merlin's Teeth you're a heedless, exceedingly maladroit, simpleton, Nymphadora!" He began to Scourgify the mess, throwing at least a dozen assorted dark and fiery glares at the young woman, when she smiled, sweetly, up at him.

"I'll bet you read your Thesaurus for that one, sweetie!" she quipped.

Minerva nearly choked on her bacon and Flitwick was once more reduced to inane laughter.

With a scowl that could extinguish all of the torches in the castle in a wink, Snape stepped behind his chair and towards the narrow door that led to the staffroom. He paused, turned slightly, and crooked a finger sharply at Tonks. Tonks let out a startled yelp as she felt herself drawn up and out of her chair. Then, like a puppet on strings, she was dragged swiftly past her chair and over to the staffroom door. With one last yelp, she disappeared through the door after the irate Potions Master.

Behind the vanishing woman, Minerva shook her head and clucked her tongue. "Poor dear," she sighed, hiding a smirk behind her teacup. "She really should not bait Severus."

Madame Hooch snorted while Dumbledore wrestled with the stubborn fork to release his beard.

Once the door was closed and Snape had cast a Silencing Spell, he released Tonks from the Puppet Strings Charm he had cast silently and wandlessly. The young witch dropped just as a puppet whose strings had been cut, into a nearby chair.

"Have you no sense of humour?" she bit out harshly.

Snape strode angrily towards the new DADA professor. "Have you no sense of decorum?" he hissed sharply.

Tonks pressed back against her chair. "Of course I do!" she protested as Snape leaned in ever closer.

"Indeed?" he scoffed. "You were flapping about like a flibbertigibbet, completely unaware of your surroundings, Nymphadora." She glared at the repeated use of the name she didn't care for. Snape snarled, "Just like a feather-headed school-girl." He snapped himself erect and spun sharply away as her mouth dropped open.

"I'm not a school-girl!" she spat angrily. Tonks' hair became a fiery red that began to toss itself about as though in a stormy wind. Snape's scowl darkened to thunderous levels and Tonks drooped, as did her hair which had gone a mousey, limp brown (the normal colour of her hair).

"Sit. Up," snapped Snape drawing swiftly away from the young witch. He did not turn to see if Tonks obeyed. He did hear the shifting swish of adjusting robes. Some may find your behaviour cheeky, perhaps even," he grimaced, "endearing." He spun back to Tonks sharply, and was not put off by her own scowl at being taken to task by her old teacher. She was sitting up, but her arms were crossed tightly, and belligerently over her chest. "I swear to Avalon, Miss Tonks," he ground out threateningly, "that if you do not present the appearance of the professor you were in your classes yesterday, I will take points from Ravenclaw as I did for your prank on your last day here."

Tonks blanched, the colour of her anger draining rapidly from her cheeks. As memorable as that prank had been (Tonks had cajoled a house elf into stealing a pair of the Potions Master's trousers to display in the Great Hall) the resulting points lost (1,500) had been a record for any student in the last three centuries, and had carried over into the new term. This made it nearly insurmountable for the students left and new in Ravenclaw to recover.

"I'm just being me, sir," Tonks spoke quietly, and with a reserve she rarely had outside of her Auror job, or her new class.

"You were not brought here to relive your halcyon days of Hogwarts youth, Miss Tonks." Snape's tone was still biting, and she had to force herself not to flinch at the razor sharp enunciation. "Your uncle called in a great deal of favors to bring you here practically overnight to not just teach the students their lessons, but to aid us in

protecting them. I have, yet, to see the Auror Lucius claims you to be, and so help me, Nymphadora, if your presence puts any child in harms way, you will not have points loss, a lecture, or disapproving expressions to worry about."

The possibility that her effusive manner might inadvertently hurt a student, fired up Tonks and she jumped up sharply, nose to chest (until Snape bent down and they were nose to nose), and declared, "I'm good at what I do, Snape! More than good! And Uncle Lucius' trust in me is unquestionable! Bet you didn't know that Shackbolt and Moody both backed up my uncle's recommendation so I'll do my job, and more if needed." Her nose then did bump Snape's and she smirked as he reared back slightly, "And if I want to wave around 'like a flibbertigibbet', or flirt with your scrawny arse, I'll do so." With her wand suddenly in her hand (the young witch's speed was astounding to behold), Tonks poked the tall wizard in the chest with the tip. "If you ever pull a Puppet String Hex on me again, Snape, I'll break your nose in such a way that only Muggle means will heal it! Got me?"

Tonks turned on her heel, and strode out of the staffroom with a wide, smug, smirk upon her lips. When the door slammed shut behind her, Snape's own smirk mirrored hers. He quite liked that Tonks had stood up to him.

Just as quickly as it had appeared, though, his brief, joviality was gone. Snape left the staffroom via a second door and proceeded down to the dungeons to prepare for his classes.

November soon came to a close. Snape ended Hermione's enforced dry spell away from her books cautioning her to live beyond the pages she often tried to disappear within. Her Head of House had noted that after the first week of being without her books, and with the restrictions in regards to the library, the girl had emerged more from her shell and had begun interacting more with her fellow Snakes. As the story of her eventual adoption by the Malfoys gained momentum, more of the Slytherins who had been wary of her, due to prejudices passed on by their parents, took more of an interest in the Muggle-born girl. Smart Hermione used this not to build upon the inherent prejudice of Purebloods versus Muggles, but as a stepping stone to build more understanding for those magical children that were the product of a mixed birth.

Not every student in Slytherin was lured to the young first years side, such as Marcus Flint, who seemed better suited to bullying anyone who wasn't him. A few other students remained wary and watchful. Pansy Parkinson would waffle between prejudice and curiosity until her own inborn vituperative nature would throw out any hope of just a simple friendship between the two girls. Millicent often found herself refereeing these verbal fights until Prefect Anglaise broke them up. Snape was forced to take points and assign detentions as Pansy, leading Crabbe and Goyle, continued to try and harass Hermione, and sometimes Draco and Harry, in Potions by misguided, and sometimes moronic attempts to sabotage their potions. Snape finally, and ultimately dealt with this annoyance by threatening expulsion for the next Slytherin who tampered with a fellow Slytherin's potion.

Snape had also begun the brewing of Wolfsbane for the Deputy Headmaster, but made the man come down to his private lab just after the last class and before dinner, to assist. The Potions Master intended for the wizard to learn how, and to master, the brewing of the potion he needed. Snape also intended to research a few improvements.

The disappearance of Quirinus Quirrell was forgotten rather quickly, at least by the students. There wasn't any student that had cared for him as a person, or as a teacher, and Tonks not only was good, but she was popular amongst all the Houses, including Slytherin. She still flirted with Snape, but moreso with the Deputy Headmaster who had the decency to blush under the young woman's attentions.

Quirrell, though, was still a puzzle for the Headmaster. He continually wondered where the young wizard might have gone to, and why, and his speculations were always attended to by Snape, over tea. Whatever plans the Headmaster had once had for Harry appeared to be stalled. There was still a search going on for the still missing Philosopher's Stone, and for this, Snape was still keeping an eye upon Hermione. He felt that if she didn't have it, then it was she who must have secreted it someplace.

With the end of November and the onset of December all the students, and even the staff could talk about were the promise of the holidays, Christmas and gift shopping, and the magnificent Malfoys Winter Ball.



It would be a busy December.

A/N: My greatest of apologies to one and all for how long it took to post this chapter. My mother came to visit for almost the entire month and I could only write here and there. This was also a difficult chapter that was really trying to slide off toward an ending I had not planned for, and so it took three re-writes to get it back in hand.

The next chapter will take Snape and the Silver Trio into the holidays. The mystery of Quirrell and the deception played upon Dumbledore will not be answered until after then. Feel free to speculate, though.

Sunday, Dec. 1, 1991

Four rooms in the Malfoy Manor had potential. One room, which had been Draco's nursery, had simply been sealed shut when he was too old for the room. Narcissa had spent at least an hour in the old nursery. She sat in the antique rocker that she had rocked her baby Dragon to sleep in, touched his old toys, many of them stuffed animals such as dragons, gryphons, and such. When she left the room, she sealed it again. Someday, she thought, Draco might want the room for his children.

That left three rooms. One was right next to Draco's bedroom. Mentally Narcissa marked that room off as she deemed it too close to her son. She felt Hermione might not, initially, feel that comfortable being so near to Draco.

Two rooms were now left. One was at the beginning of the corridor and the other was at the end. It was this room at the end, that overlooked Narcissa's prize rose garden, that she chose for Hermione.

Stepping into the bedroom, it was an empty palette of white to serve Narcissa's love of decorating. She had long since mastered over a hundred decorating spells, and although she could match her husband in a duel, Lucius couldn't come close to Narcissa's skill in decorating.

Drapes, carpet, bedding, walls, windows, and the fireplace, would all experience the discerning witch's wand. She began with the bed and waved her wand as she chanted a spell in Latin that would affect the canopy and curtains and the bedding.

Using Autumn colours from the end of the season, soft browns mixed with warm amber, highlights of yellow, deep reds that were almost jewel-like. The canopy and curtains were gauzy layers of those colours that opened onto bedding of soft, rich amber. The coverlet was a patchwork velvet that evoked images of those fantastically old libraries that Hermione loved. This theme would be simplified by the gentle brown carpet framed by a gold scrollworked edge. The bare walls took on character with pale oak wainscoting and a pale striped wallpaper of satin that was in an eye-soothing cream. The drapes returned to the rich colours of amber, gold, and rich brown from the bed and were in a classic pinch pleat tied back

by thick tassels, and topped by a valance that mirrored the library theme.

French doors led out onto a narrow balcony of wrought iron. Over the French doors Narcissa changed the plain sheers to deep red and darkened the light oak frame of the doors to a dark oak. The last to be touche by Narcissa's magical treatment was the window seat that was a wonderful study nook under the corner framed window which had received the same window treatment as the French doors. The window seat itself repeated the light, pale striped pattern of the wallpaper in brushed silk and satin. The pillows that lined the window seat mirrored all the Autumn colours of the room.

Once that part of the décor was complete, Narcissa called for two house elves who brought in two night stands, a desk, a wardrobe, and bookshelves. With more magic Narcissa sunk the bookshelves into the walls on either side of the wide fireplace, and on either side of the window seat. The desk, a ship captain's desk of heavily carved oak held many drawers for parchment, stationary, quills, ink pots. Other drawers were hidden to secret little treasures and keepsakes. The wardrobe, of light oak, was opposite the bed and had shelves and hanging space for everything a young girl might need. The end tables were the most notable pieces of furniture. They resembled stacks of old books with glowing, real amber surfaces. Each nightstand had two drawers for what-nots.

Narcissa shooed the house elves away, then grinned, and clapped her hands together. It would be a week before Hermione arrived at the manor. She couldn't wait for Hermione to see the room!

Friday, Dec. 6, 1991

Remus Lupin sat in the Headmaster's chair at the staff table since the Headmaster had left for a meeting for the day with the Wizengamot. He had just finished looking over the students that morning, surreptitiously tuning his 'wolf' hearing to various conversations. Chatter was high, now that it was December and there were so many events to look forward to.

At the Slytherin table, most of the talk was about the Malfoys Winter Ball. Draco was holding court over this subject and was pleased at being the center of attention.

"How many years has your family had the Winter Ball?" asked Pansy Parkinson, who had been doing her best to ignore the Silver Trio, but couldn't since her parents had been invited to the Ball.

"Two centuries," boasted Draco. "It was begun by Augustus Malfoy to celebrate the generosity of the season."

Marcus Flint snorted derisively, "As if your family was ever generous!"

Flint let out a whooshing 'oomph' as Prefects Billock and Anglaise, on either side of the rude boy, elbowed him sharply.

Draco just ignored the lout who was always casting aspersions towards everybody. Millicent Bulstrode spoke up and said, "My da' says your grandfather stopped having the Winter Balls. Was that because of You-know-who?"

Draco scowled. He'd seen the Dark Mark upon his father's arm. He had even seen how the vile thing burned when the Dark Lord called his subjects. He also knew that his father hated it and had been looking for a way for forever to get rid of it. For his father's sake, Draco didn't like to be reminded of the Dark wizard who had so besmirched the Malfoy family name that Lucius, then Draco, and probably even Draco's own son would be devoting their lives to restoring the honor that had once belonged to the Malfoy name.

"Why did your grandfather stop the Ball?" asked Hermione softly. Draco glanced to his side at his soon-to-be sister. Hermione had been asking him an awful lot of questions lately about the Malfoy family, but she had been very conscious not to ask anything about Abraxas Malfoy, Lucius' father.

Draco replied to Hermione, "Abraxas didn't care for all the charities that his grandfather and his grandfather before him, and so on, had set up. There were a lot of charities to benefit Squibs, and Muggle-borns, and Half-Muggles. Orphanages, and primary schools... all that good stuff and Abraxas didn't want to be associated with them. Since the Winter Balls were a huge charity event to raise money, and to gift it, Abraxas stopped them as soon as he was Lord of the Manor. Papa brought back the Winter Ball as soon as he was Lord." Draco smiled in pride and Hermione did as well.

"So all your charities are for Muggles now, are they?" spat Flint.

Draco replied sharply before the prefects could bruise Flint's ribs again, "The Malfoys support WORTHY charities and it doesn't matter if they're Mugglish or not!"

Flint's laughter was cut off by another elbow from Billock, who added, "Our world could use more like the Malfoys, you idiot. Maybe that's why your dad's known as Thomas 'skin' Flint!"

Lupin did not hear Flint's rejoinder at that insult as he heard something up here at the staff table.

"Do give me some sugar, professor," purred Tonks' voice to Snape.

Lupin glared down at the young witch. Tonks retained a relaxed, yet professional mien when teaching, for Lupin had observed her class, as part of his Deputy duties. All that went out the window at mealtimes and after the staff meetings. The young woman's teasing of the dour Potions Master was funny, at first, and there were several staff members who were curious about how long Snape could ignore Tonks. Lupin even suspected that there was a secret bet on amongst the staff about just that.

The Deputy Headmaster had hoped that Dumbledore might speak to his new instructor, but Lupin had only noticed that the twinkle in Dumbledore's eyes had a rather lecherous bent to them when hearing the flirtatious teasing at the staff table.

Of course, Tonks seemed to be flirting with him, as well, noted Lupin to himself. It was different, though. Shy looks, smiles when he entered the staff room, a polite 'good morning, Remus', at breakfast. That attention Lupin found flattering. He didn't care, though, for the teasing Tonks directed at Snape. It reminded him a bit too much of the verbal taunting Sirius Black had once heaped upon a much younger wizard.

Lupin threw his napkin down upon his plate. He let out a small huff, then rose, and moved the few steps down to where Tonks sat next to the Potions professor. His sudden presence interrupted another suggestive remark from Tonks as she turned slightly to better look up at the Deputy Headmaster behind her.

"Professor Tonks? I would like to speak with you before your first class, please." As Lupin turned away, Tonks' smile faded and Snape, who had been studiously ignoring the young woman by drinking his coffee and reading the Daily Prophet, turned an inquiring look at the departing wizard.

Tonks, sensing that all was not well, pushed away from the staff table and trotted obediently after Lupin.

Snape's eyebrow rose fractionally. "Lupin did not appear entirely too happy," he murmured softly, yet with a slight smirk.

Draco was arguing, now. Something about his father doing this and that and Hermione was trying to support him. Harry wasn't really comprehending it all. Most likely he figured it was about the Winter Ball which seemed to be all of Slytherin House was nattering on about.

However, shopping for Christmas, the Winter Ball and what it was all about, sort of hung about on the periphery of Harry's senses that morning. Harry had taken more time than usual this morning to wake up, but after Draco had shook him awake, he forced a smile onto his face and went to take a shower.

The shower had revitalised Harry and he had happily traipsed on up to the Great Hall for breakfast. It was the arrival of the morning porridge, and fruit, and pumpkin juice, and toast, and eggs, that sent a swirl of fatigue through Harry. He had eaten a few spoonfuls of porridge, but then he just began to stare at it as he sort of listlessly slapped its gummy surface with his spoon.

During the argument Harry rested his head on his arms and removed his gaze from the porridge and stared at his small bowl of fruit with half-lidded eyes. It sort of seemed to be swimming... floating... becoming many, then one...

"Harry? Harry are you all right?" Harry didn't answer Tara Anglaise except for a long sigh. He felt her hand touch his back tentatively and though he flinched, he didn't pull away like he normally would. He just sighed again.

Prefect Anglaise had noticed a flushed look to Harry's cheek when he sat down at the Slytherin table, but he was laughing at the

time, so she didn't think too much about it. It wasn't until Draco was arguing with Pansy Parkinson about the ever present topic of discussion: the Winter Ball, that she noted Harry sort of half-slumped over his breakfast and was slapping at his porridge with his spoon. The first year soon gave up on that activity and laid his head down on his arms. That's when she got up from her place at the table to check on him. It was when she lightly touched his back that she knew there was a problem.

"Just stay put, Harry," she said softly. "I'll get Professor Snape."

Tonks had trotted after the Deputy Headmaster to his office, but his long legs left her behind rather quickly. When she got to the office the armor of King Henry the VIII stood in her way. She glowered at the armor.

"Look you, I don't have the bleedin' passwor..." Tonks' rant was cut off as the armor stepped smartly aside. She walked into the office and was just slightly startled as the door slipped shut behind her.

"Sit down, Professor Tonks," requested Lupin as he moved to the other side of his desk and seated himself in his chair.

Tonks did so, rearranging her robes a tad nervously. "What's wrong, Professor Lupin?"

"I would like you to stop harassing Professor Snape," said the Deputy Headmaster flatly.

For a second, Tonks was completely taken off-guard by the wizard's bluntness. She gaped and her hair went from the dark blue to a rather sickly green. She then glared angrily.

"Did he whine that I was harassing him?" she asked incredulously.

Lupin's eyes narrowed in warning. "Professor Snape did not need to. We've all been witness to your teasing and it grows tedious."

"It's just harmless flirting!" Tonks tried to defend herself.

"I beg to differ," Lupin declared. "If you were just teasing Professor Snape now and then, I might believe you. However, you have continued this behavior non-stop for every meal and at this

morning's staff meeting. That is harassment and will no longer be permitted."

"Oh for Circe's sake!" she scoffed. "If it bothered him, he'd say so, Remus. You're blowing this all out of proportion."

"Have you not noticed that Severus has been pointedly ignoring you?" Tonks frowned slightly. "You're an Auror, Professor Tonks, and you ought to be more aware of your surroundings, and most especially you should be aware of the feelings of those you interact with."

Tonks laughed. "Feelings! Old Snape?" She smirked to show she was only joking, but the Deputy only frowned. Tonks huffed softly, "Really, Remus. It's just teasing! It's funny and it's harmless." She smiled winningly at the Deputy.

Lupin scowled and his amber eyes flashed with his restrained anger. "I know that our Severus Snape can be a stone stoic, but he does have feelings, Professor Tonks and your simple 'teasing' is harassment, and bullying." He stood up, towering over the slight witch. "Your position here was offered by the Headmaster, but it is the Board of Governors who will remove you if a complaint is filed. I can assure you that you would not be asked to return as an instructor, and I'm quite certain that your advancement in the Auror Corps would be hindered."

Tonks was quiet for several, long minutes as she tried to digest what she had been told. Anger passed over her features, along with a morphing to bright red hair. When her anger faded, her hair faded to her natural, mousey brown colour. "I really meant no harm by it," she sighed heavily. "I thought he was ignoring me as part of the joke. Wasn't he?"

Lupin walked around his desk and sat down in the chair beside the young woman. "Professor... Dora," he addressed Tonks the way she had asked him to at the beginning of the week. "Regardless of whether or not your taunts were meant for Severus or someone else, they got old. Quickly. They were not kind..." he held up his hand when she started to protest. "Your words were not said with friendship, nor affection, Dora. Hence, they were unkind." He smiled softly. "I believe you to be a kind person and I think that you should



realise that not all people are going to respond to your... exuberance in the same manner." Lupin sighed. "Especially Severus."

Tonks stared down at her high-heeled, black boots and tapped the tips of her toes together as she bit her lower lip. When she looked up, Lupin was pleased to see the witch was truly contrite. "I'll stop my nonsense, Professor Lupin. Do you think I ought to apologise to Sn... Professor Snape?"

Lupin chuckled slightly as he stood. "I do think you should apologise, but don't be surprised if he may not acknowledge it."

Tonks stood as well and smiled. "He might not, but at least Professor Snape will hear it."

"Thank you, Dora." The young witch gave a quick curtsy and then left the Deputy Headmaster's office. Once she was gone, Lupin turned to his desk where a letter from Molly Weasley waited him.

Dear Headmaster,

Ronnie is due back at Hogwarts on the 12th of December. I think with it being so close to the holidays that it might be best if he returns once the holidays are over with all the other students.

Ronnie is caught up in all of the work that his teachers have been sending and I expect him to keep up his grades once he is back in school. Please pass on my gratitude to all of his teachers for taking the time to send me his work.

Please expect a letter from Ronnie soon. He will be sending a similar letter of apology to Minerva McGonagall and there will be one for Hermione Granger, but I will leave it up to you whether or not she ought to be given it.

I believe that my son fully understands how awful he acted and he genuinely regrets his actions. I have spoken to Percy who will keep a sharp eye on him.

Sincerely,

Molly Weasley

Snape was just about to leave breakfast for the start of his class day when Prefect Anglaise rushed up to the staff table and stopped him from vanishing through the narrow door behind the staff table that Tonks and Lupin had recently gone through.

"Sir, it's Harry," Tara blurted out. "He's very sick."

Snape moved away from the table and in his haste to reach his son, almost knocked into Tara who stepped swiftly out of the way and fell into step behind her Head of House.

Snape took in the tableau of Harry with his head on his arms, eyelids drooping heavily. The boy was clearly fighting to stay awake and was losing. Snape rested the back of his hand against Harry's forehead.

"Hi, Dad," Harry said almost against the surface of the table, his eyelids finally winning the fight.

The Potions Master grimaced tightly, "He's burning up," he muttered softly as he maneuvered himself so that he could ease his son away from the table and to stand. Harry did stand, barely, leaning heavily against his father. He was bleary-eyed and was babbling, "Don' tell Unc' Vernon, please Aun' 'Tunia?"

"Professor?" asked Hermione worriedly as she looked at her friend. "Will he be all right?"

"I have no doubt Madame Pomfrey can get this sorted out." Snape glanced quickly at his Snakes. "Off to class! I do not want to see any of you being late to your first class!"

The Slytherins quickly scattered. Hermione and Draco hesitated, but at a glare from Snape, they trotted on out of the Great Hall.

"I'll jus' go to bed, Dad," Harry murmured somewhat lucidly as his knees buckled. Snape caught the boy up into his arms and strode out of the Great Hall and to the Infirmary.

"It's simple Muggle Measles, Severus," Poppy pronounced after running her Diagnosis on the heavily, but naturally sleeping boy.

"Measles? I thought that was one of the diseases Muggles vaccinated..." he stopped and glowered. "His aunt never had him vaccinated, did she?" he asked tautly, already knowing the answer.

"Another sign of neglect, Severus, but this time it is to his advantage," she smiled and began writing down a potion recipe. She then handed it over to the Potions Master. "Muggle vaccinations in wizards and witches of Muggle birth tend to be a bit tricky to treat, though not impossible. Since Harry's aunt was so kind to not have him vaccinated we'll be able to treat the child our way and in about two days time he'll be back to his old self."

Snape perused the potion recipe. He nodded to himself as he confirmed, mentally, that he had all the ingredients. "I can brew this during class today so I'll bring it by at lunch time. Will Harry be all right?"

"I'm fairly certain he's just going to sleep until then. Measles doesn't always attack the body in all the same way, so Harry's just very tired. If he wakes up, I have a Cough Relief Potion ready. He's just running a fever, at the moment, and I'll spell a Fever Reducer Potion into his tummy. We've caught this before the worst of the symptoms have shown, so that's good."

Snape reached down and caressed his son's very warm cheek. Other than that, Harry didn't appear all that sick.

"Muggle Measles is, however, very contagious, Severus, so be on the lookout for any Muggle-borns in your House that might be susceptible. I'll send a notification to all the teachers to be aware of it."

Snape's head jerked up. "We are not going to have an epidemic, will we, Poppy?"

The medi-witch shook her head. "Most Muggles vaccinate their children. Even you were vaccinated as a child."

Snape snorted quietly. "Thank Merlin for small favours." He touched his son's cheek once more, leaned down, and whispered into the sleeping child's ear, "I shall be back before you know it, Little One. Sleep well." He then pocketed the recipe, which he had already memorised. "Take care of him, Poppy."

Poppy smiled gently, "Harry will be fine, Severus. Go on to class before you're much later."

First years Transfiguration was interrupted by the arrival of a white raven that flew in over the heads of the students and then dropped a scroll onto Hermione's desk. It then flew away without any need for a treat.

"Read that after class, Miss Granger," warned Minerva as she glanced over her spectacles at the girl.

Hermione stuffed the scroll into her bag. "Yes, ma'am."

Draco quickly leaned over to his friend and whispered, "That was Lumiere. mother's albino raven."

"He's pretty!" Hermione whispered back. "What do you think she sent?"

"Mr. Malfoy and Miss Granger!" Minerva snapped sharply.

Both children sat up straight quickly and sent quiet apologies to their teacher.

Instead of going to lunch, Draco and Hermione ran up to the Infirmary to check on their friend. As they arrived they found their Head of House seated behind Harry as Snape supported him and helped him to drink down a canary yellow potion. They both moved to chairs on the opposite side of the bed, and remained quiet.

Harry grimaced. "Ugh! I never thought I'd complain about a potion being sweet, but that's... blech!"

"There is rather a high percentage of sweet herbs in the potion, Harry," Snape elucidated. "One more swallow, and then you are finished."

Harry glared down at the obnoxious yellow potion. "Must I, Dad?" Snape held the potion phial closer to his son's mouth in answer. Harry gulped, then closed his eyes and opened his mouth like a little bird. Snape poured the last bit of the potion into Harry's mouth, and

Harry let out an exaggerated sound of disgust. Snape then helped him back down into bed.

"Hi, Harry," said Hermione.

"What have you got?" asked Draco a bit luridly. "Is it Dragon Pox?"

Harry was already falling asleep, despite being pleased at seeing his friends, so Snape answered for him, "Muggle Measles." He glanced over at Hermione. "Have you been vaccinated against measles, Miss Granger?"

"My father was in charge of that, so I had all my shots," she nodded.

Snape inclined his head once in acknowledgment. At least someone had been looking out for the child's health.

"Shots?" Draco paled slightly. "Somebody shot you, 'Mione?"

She giggled and shook her head. "A shot is medicine given by a needle under the skin."

Draco was now looking rather green at that information. He gasped, "And Muggles did this to you?"

"Honestly, Draco!" she shook her head. "It's no big deal. Hardly hurts at all."

"Barbaric," murmured Draco.

Hermione shook her head and then leaned down towards her bookbag. She pulled out the pale cream, heavy stationary that Snape had seen Narcissa use to announce events for various functions she was in charge of.

"Sir, Aunt Cissy..."

Draco interrupted with a tired whisper, "Mother."

Hermione glowered at him. "Only after the adoption paperwork is processed, Draco."

The blonde boy shrugged. "Who needs paper? Papa and mother already view you as their daughter, 'Mione." He regarded his friend with a lazy, squinty gaze that she chose to ignore.

Hermione focused her attention on Snape. "Aunt Cissy sent this to tell me that there is going to be a Naming Ceremony for me and I wanted to invite you and Harry. Sir."

Snape nodded solemnly, his honor at the invitation clear. "Do you know what a Naming Ceremony is all about, Miss Granger?"

"I haven't really had time to research it, but I was thinking to do so this... evening?" As she watched her Head of House, Hermione had the impression that she wouldn't be allowed the research she wanted to do and she was puzzled as to why not.

"You would learn the history of the Naming Ceremony, but you would not learn of the ritual itself," explained Snape quietly. He glanced down at his son who was deeply asleep and buried snugly under his covers. "Each family has its own ritual handed down from parent to child. Pureblood families tend to regard the Naming Ceremony as something private and only to be shared with... cherished friends."

Hermione glanced from her letter to Snape at his emphasis on the last two words. "You and Harry are very important to me, sir." Her cheeks coloured. "Cherished, even."

"When did mother say the Naming Ceremony would be, Hermione?" asked Draco as he tried to glance at his mother's elegant handwriting.

"A few hours before the Winter Ball," Hermione lifted her hand to wrap a curl of her hair around her finger. "Uncle Lucius and Aunt Cissy want to present me at the ball."

"Wicked!" exclaimed Draco. "This is going to be the best Christmas ever!"

Before dinner that evening, Tonks waited in a shadowed alcove by the wide doors to the Great Hall. Her quarry was a singular minded Potions professor who wanted to finish his dinner and get back to

his son in the Infirmary. Consequently, he was taken aback by the pink-haired DADA professor stepping towards him from the shadows.

"Professor Tonks, if you do not mind I would like to get my obligations at dinner over and done with," he began with a slight sneer.

"In a minute Sna... uhm, Professor Snape," said Tonks making sure she blocked his path to the Great Hall. "If I can just have a moment or two, I need to speak to you."

Snape nodded curtly and indicated that they ought to move towards the dungeon entrance for a bit more privacy. Tonks led the way and once they reached the quieter spot, she began her apology. Snape crossed his arms over his chest and glared at the young witch.

"Uhm... it was pointed out to me that I've not been real fair to you lately, sir, and I realise now my... uhm... teasing was insensitive. I'd just like to apologise for my behavior and assure you that it won't happen again." Tonks gave him a sincere smile, hoping against hope that she'd receive at least a civil acknowledgment. True to form, though, she did not.

"If you are quite finished babbling, professor, I shall get on with my dinner." Snape strode past Tonks, not even giving her a backwards look.

Tonks smirked, and shrugged. At least, she told herself quietly, the beanpole heard her apology.

As for Snape, inwardly he appreciated the apology but he wasn't about to let the little chit know of it. He strode into the Great Hall, saw that Dumbledore had returned from the Ministry, and made his way to his side of the staff table. Oddly, the Deputy Headmaster, who usually sat next to the Headmaster, was seated next to him with Minerva on his other side. Lupin smiled at Snape, but did not intrude upon the other man's dinner.

Saturday, Dec. 7, 1991

A much recovered Harry Snape was sitting up in his Infirmary bed eating dinner with his father. Both their meal trays magically hovered at just the right height so neither spilled anything. Just as he was

going to start in on his vegetables (Spring squash), Harry looked up at his father.

"Do you celebrate Christmas, Dad?" he asked in the hopes of delaying having to eat the slimy looking squash.

"I do not," Snape replied simply. And, he had not. Snape planned his schedule around the holidays only because the students had to celebrate anything that provided them with free goodies and enough sugar to keep them awake, and into mischief, for weeks. Holidays at his home, growing up, had been reason for him to secrete himself away with a book. They generally ended unpleasantly. However, Snape said nothing of this to Harry.

Harry's shoulders drooped as he stared down at the persistent squash. "Oh. Okay." Using his fork, he picked up a piece of squash, put it into his mouth, and then washed it quickly down with a swallow of milk. He barely was able to suppress the grimace. He really hated squash!

Snape smirked silently at his son and his struggle with the vegetable. To be truthful, he wasn't all that fond of squash, either. It was one of those vegetables that just had a texture that was really something not to think of.

When Harry didn't take another bite of food and just stared at his feet covered by the blanket, Snape asked, "Did you wish to celebrate the holidays, Harry?"

The boy's head lifted and he nodded, rather miserably, as if he knew his father was just going to say no to him.

Snape frowned slightly, in understanding. "You have never celebrated Christmas, have you?"

Harry shook his head. "I got to watch the tree at night and sometimes Aunt Petunia let me watch them open presents." His smile was bittersweet.

"I suppose your relatives never gave you any gifts?" he asked, just barely keeping the bitterness out of his tone.



"Oh yeah. Aunt Petunia always gave me a bag of Dudley's old clothes and Uncle Vernon gave me a hanger, five pence," he began counting the stingy gifts from various Christmases off on his fingers, "a feather, a plastic laundry bag, a packet of seeds... that one was the best present." He smiled. "I got to plant the seeds in Spring and they were all different coloured dahlias."

Snape stabbed the last piece of his roast beef so harshly, the fork scraped on the plate. He had always meant to celebrate the season with his son, but now he planned on doing just a touch more than what he thought might be sufficient. "We will be celebrating Christmas, Harry, and there will be gifts so it might be wise for you to start thinking about what you wish to give to your friends."

Harry's eyes sparkled. "I get to give gifts, Dad?"

"You do. I'll give you an increase in your allowance so that you can purchase your presents when we go to Hogsmeade." The bright smile on his son's face warmed his heart and Snape thought that, just maybe, Christmas might become a welcome tradition in the Snape family.

Saturday, Dec. 21, 1991

The week flew by as students worked hard in their classes in the hopes that vacation homework would be as little as possible; it wasn't. The teachers, it seemed, were all sadistic homework assigning fiends. Even Binns, the ghostly instructor of History assigned a chapter to read and an essay on some goblin war.

A few more, un-innoculated, Muggle-born students were caught by the measles, but the Muggle malady was swiftly dealt with by Madame Pomfrey so there was no worry of an epidemic.

Today was the day for all the students to pack up for the holidays. Miraculously, not a single student would be left behind for Christmas, although Harry, not quite sure where he was going, had almost signed up to stay at Hogwarts. Snape assured him that there was someplace else to go to besides Hogwarts, and, just in case, reassured his son that he would never be going back to the Dursleys. He had yet to tell the boy that Vernon was dead, and the house at Privet Drive belonged to someone else.

Draco and Harry thumped down the stairs from their dorm with their trunks and then sat on either side of Hermione who, already packed for at least an hour, was waiting for them on the sofa in front of the fireplace. Snape would be taking them, and a majority of Slytherin House by carriage to the train station.

"What's that you got there?" asked Harry as he watched Hermione slowly turning a rather plain looking, jagged piece of stone about in her hand.

"Just a rock, I guess," she said, her eyes glued to its mottled grey, black, and white surface. "A few weeks ago it was a beautiful red colour, but then all of a sudden the colour just bled away." She stopped flipping it and put it to her ear.

Draco frowned. "Does it talk?"

Hermione laughed a bit self-consciously. "No. Well, I sort of thought maybe it sang." Both boys were frowning at her now. "At night, I kept it under my pillow, and sometimes I'd wake up hearing this really beautiful song; like an angel was singing." She shrugged and tucked the stone into her bag. "Maybe I was just dreaming."

All three were quiet for a moment, and then Harry asked, "'Mione, you excited about going to Malfoy Manor?"

"Of course she is!" answered Draco for the girl. "It's the best place in the world! Who wouldn't be excited?"

Hermione smiled at Draco, then at Harry. "What he said."

Snape swept into the common room. He wore his Winter cloak of heavy, black wool, a pair of black gloves, and a green scarf round his neck. He scowled at the number of students in the common room. "Why are not any of you in your cloaks and hats?" he demanded sharply. "Hurry up!"

There was a confusion of scrambling as Snape's Snakes made to comply. More students came down the stairs, ready for a carriage ride, and with their trunks either thumping down the stairs, or levitating behind them.

"Miss Anglaise, Mr. Billock," Snape addressed the prefects. "Take a count and make certain we are not leaving anyone behind."

Tara and Gordon quickly began counting heads, then compared their numbers. Tara spoke up, "Everyone is here, sir."

"Very good," acknowledged Snape. "Let us be off, then." With Tara in the middle and Gordon bringing up the rear, Snape led his Snakes out of the dungeons and up to the Entrance Hall where he had the prefects perform another counting of heads. He then ushered the students outside to where a series of black carriages with silver trim awaited them. There were no horses to be seen in front of any of the carriages. The first years were puzzled at this, but the older years were familiar with it. The answer the first years were told about the horseless carriages was simply, 'magic'.

Once it looked like everyone was loaded onto the carriages, Snape inspected each one, made certain that trunks were stowed beneath the seats, and that the Warming Charm for each carriage was working. He then went to the first carriage where his Silver Trio waited, stepped up into the carriage, shouted, "Onward!" and then seated himself beside Harry as the carriages began to move away from the castle.

Snape didn't have to allow Harry to travel on the train with his friends, but such travel made a child feel grown up at this age, and the trip was one that had had Harry, normally rather reserved, chatting non-stop from the moment he had recovered from his measles. So, in a rare bout of magnanimity, Snape became one of the escorts for the students at the train station. Normally he left such duties to the Deputy and any other teacher who was foolish enough to volunteer for the duty. The Potions Master consoled himself that this would allow him to see his son safely ensconced upon the train until he met him at King's Cross where together they would Apparate to Snape's home.

Several hours later, Snape was no longer an escort but simply a parent at King's Cross awaiting the arrival of his child. Lucius and Narcissa stood with him as they waited to retrieve Draco and Hermione.

Three children, all with red-cheeked smiles in the brisk cold of Winter debarked from the train and over to their parents. Harry,

Draco, and Hermione made their goodbyes, rather over-long, in Snape's opinion, since tomorrow they would all be going together to Paris. When such farewells appeared not to be ending, Snape grasped Harry by the shoulder and drew him down the platform to a Disapparating Point.

The trip was short, but it was enough to cause Harry's stomach to think of Apparating as a dubious style of wizarding travel. Snape, always prepared, had a potion on hand to settle Harry's stomach before his breakfast could revisit in the worst way. Once taken care of, Harry took in their surroundings.

They were in an industrial part of Muggle London, Snape told him. The snow was slushy, dirty in some places, and glowering clouds up above threatened to rain soon. Adding to the gloom were the twin towers of an abandoned factory. As they walked down the street, Harry noticed that most, if not all of the houses, had boarded up windows and doors. The place was eerily silent, and the enthusiasm he'd had for seeing where his father lived, was quickly drying up.

"This is where I grew up," Snape said into the gloom as they approached a two-story ramshackle of a manor that looked to be painted out of some Dickensian novel. It was old, with paint peeling, and simply looked sad. It made Harry feel sad. Even so, he moved towards the house, not immediately noticing that his father wasn't following him. Harry stopped and glanced over his shoulder.

Snape appeared lost in the past. His features were grim, almost pained. It made Harry's heart hurt to see his father this way. After several minutes, Snape spoke up, pointing off to his left. "This way, Harry."

Feeling a bit confused, Harry followed Snape through a broken fence, over brambles, and some distance away from the street they had been on to what had, at one time been a small park. The slide was broken, the swings rusted; one had a chain missing so the ancient, wooden seat hung only from the other chain. Harry was not feeling sad anymore, he was feeling depressed. This was a terrible place to grow up.

Snape made his way over to the broken swing set. With a gloved hand he touched the swing with the missing chain causing the seat

to swing. The remaining, rusty chain, squeaked softly. As Harry looked up at his father, he had a slight smile at the corner of his lips.

"When I was eight years old, I watched a pretty little red haired girl swinging on these swings. She was swinging very high. Her sister kept screeching at her to stop being so reckless. Suddenly, at the height of her swinging, she leapt off the swing and floated like a dove's feather to the ground. Her sister was livid, but she was giggling." Harry was enchanted by the story. Somehow he knew just who his father was speaking of.

"I told Lily she was a witch that same day and her sister Petunia mistook my words for something more offensive. Although they both ran home, I met Lily again the next day, and we became friends." Snape motioned Harry to his side. When Harry had moved, Snape crouched down so his head was level with Harry's shoulder and then pointed across the playground towards a row of houses with their backs to the old playground.

"See that house? The one with the fading, green paint and has three windows?" Harry nodded as he stared hard at the house. "That's where your mother grew up. Her parents, your grandparents, were Lea and Gus Evans." Snape stood and placed his hand upon his son's back. "It is unfortunate you never knew your grandparents, Harry."

"What were they like?" asked Harry as he memorised the house before him.

"Gus was a plumber. He taught me the Muggle way of fixing a lot of things in the house." Harry snickered as he tried to imagine his father fixing a leaky pipe. "I will have you know, child, that those are good skills to have, even if you are a wizard." He gave Harry a light nudge upon his shoulder, and Harry giggled. Snape smirked. "Gus loved to read anything and everything. For a Muggle, he had an impressive library that also served as an office for him. I remember being introduced to Mark Twain, Ernest Hemingway, and other authors your grandfather enjoyed."

"What was grandma like?" asked Harry.

Snape smiled fondly. "Ahhh, your grandmother Lea was an amazing woman, Harry. As I mentioned once before, Lea was an exceptional

cook, but her passion was for volunteer work. Petunia always complained when the three of us helped out, but I rather liked it. That was her 'retirement' work. When she was younger, Lea was an English teacher."

"Was my grandmother the one that made you speak like you do, Dad?" asked Harry, his tongue nervously in his cheek.

Snape glared down for a moment at his son, then gave him a small smile. "Perhaps Lea did. I do recall that she was always telling Lily and I to 'enunciate' and to 'speak the King's English'." His eyebrow raised a smidgen as he gave his son a mock glare. "Have you issues with the way I speak, child?"

"Noooo!" Harry shook his head. "It's just weird, sometimes, but it's you, Dad, so I think it works."

"I am sincerely happy that you approve," Snape said drily.

Harry was quiet for a few moments, then asked, "Did Aunt Petunia like mum?"

Snape started slightly. It shouldn't have been an unexpected question, but it was a difficult one to answer, at least truthfully. Carefully he began, "I believe that Petunia was jealous of Lily. As children, the two sisters often got into fights, and Petunia never held back on hurtful insults."

"No," agreed Harry. He remembered all too clearly Aunt Petunia's hurtful words. Sometimes they were sharper than his uncle's fists. Harry shuddered as a sudden vision of his uncle loomed up within his mind. Using his Occlumency, he squashed the visage of his uncle's face in his mind, and then took a few, deep breaths.

"Harry?" Snape asked with concern as he watched his son's cheeks pale as he tried to control his breathing. Harry's fists were clutching spasmodically as his eyelids fluttered. Snape grabbed one hand. "Little One? What is it?"

"Uncle Vernon!" Harry spat out. "Dad! I keep trying to push his face away but he... and what if he comes back for me, for real... and I can't!" Harry's breathing became little frantic hitches.

Snape drew his son close to his side and spoke in his ear. "Vernon Dursley is never coming to get you, Harry. Not ever." He wasn't certain whether or not his words were helping, so with a slight sigh of decision, he said in firmer, yet quiet tones, "He cannot. Vernon Dursley is dead."

For a moment Snape was afraid the truth was too much as Harry's breathing seemed to stop altogether. He was about to cast a Resuscitation Spell when Harry drew in a deep breath as his head turned to look his father's eyes.

"He's dead? Are you sure?" Harry's voice pleaded.

"Very. It happened in prison. Vernon Dursley will never bother you again," Snape affirmed.

Harry drew in a deep, shuddering breath and slowly let it out. For a solid minute he just concentrated on his breathing as his mind was finally, and ultimately, able to put the spectre of Vernon Dursley to rest. Snape was pleased when, a few moments later, the boy's breaths evened out.

"I'm okay, Dad," Harry mustered up a smile, but it was a tired one. It was then that Snape realised that the young child had had a very long day. "Are we going to stay at the first house you showed me?" Harry slipped one hand behind his back and crossed his fingers. He really hoped the answer was 'no' because the place really was sad.

Snape had no need for Legilimens to read what was on his son's mind, and he smirked. He hadn't told Harry that he had gotten rid of the old, crumbling two-story after the death of his Muggle father. It had been a depressing place to grow up in, and he'd had no desire to spend any time on the old place turning it into something more livable.

As for the Prince family land holdings, he had sold those, as well. No one knew that most of the Prince fortune had either gone for much needed school supplies at Hogwarts, a scholarship for the most financially unfortunate – yes, that meant Severus Snape, in a way, had so far paid for the educations of all the Weasley brats! – and a Squib Orphanage in Ireland. There were many family objects he hadn't been able to sell, mostly because they were either moving portraits of Prince members he really didn't know, or could recall and

he doubted very much anyone would want them. The books that he could keep were in his library in his quarters at Hogwarts or where he was taking Harry. Then, there were many other objects that should be in no innocent witch or wizards hands. Most of the jewelry, which held no sentimental value for Snape, he kept for investment needs, or for gifts. It meant he hadn't had to buy a gift for anyone in almost fifteen years.

"Hold on," warned Snape and he lifted his arms slightly as Harry threw his own arms about his waist and buried his face in his father's abdomen. Snape laid his hands against his son's back, and within a blink they were gone from the neighborhood of his childhood.

Draco snickered as he watched Hermione's face. The young girl was staring upwards at the huge chandelier of crystal that hung over the grand entryway to Malfoy Manor. Dozens of candles that never dripped wax lit up the entire entryway that was of white marble, highlights of real gold, and a wide staircase that led to balconies on either side of the large, oak door she had just stepped through. Beneath the chandelier was an equally impressive fountain of dancing fae-folk that splashed in the great entryway. There was no question to the visitor of the wealth that lay beyond the ornate doors of the manor.

Hermione, stunned by the opulence, couldn't help but find it a bit intimidating. She lowered her head, since she was beginning to feel a bit dizzy, and let out a slow sigh of breath.

"You live here, Draco?" it was a silly thing to ask, but Hermione couldn't think of anything else to say.

"Yes, but it's nothing, 'Mione." Draco grabbed the girl's hand and went through a door just beneath the landing that separated the staircase into two wings of stairs.

The small corridor they went through was almost like a tunnel. There were dozens of portraits of past Malfoys lining the walls. In between some of the portraits were silent statues of gleaming armor. When Hermione drifted too close to one, she was startled as it moved and thrust its weapon at her in a threatening manner. Hermione let out a squeak and Draco giggled again.



They emerged into a reception room of blue and gold lit by another chandelier that was a smaller twin to the one in the entryway. Columns of marble defined the reception room as being circular. The reception room was domed, and above the chandelier was a painting to rival that of the Sistine Chapel. Hermione let out another huff of breath.

This was too much for the girl who suddenly, and irrationally, had a desire for her own, plain home. Even if her parents rarely knew she was around, she would have her books, and her little bedroom. All this gold, silver, rich colours, statuary, and paintings, and tapestries... Hermione found it exhausting. She felt in a sudden need for the bracing air.

"Draco!" The young boy's smirk was wiped from his face at the sound of his mother's voice. Narcissa never shouted, but her voice could become sharp, and when it did, it was never a good sign.

Narcissa, in robes of soft blue, strode into the reception room towards the two children. Her gentle brow was furrowed with her displeasure, at her son. "Your father gave you instructions to take Hermione through the family entrance!"

"But, Mother! I thought she'd like to see the Manor properly!" Draco protested.

"You did not!" Narcissa glowered at her son, her hands on her hips. "You're showing off again, and it's vulgar. Go to your room, and unpack."

Without argument, other than a thinning of his lips, Draco stomped off to the right, and disappeared through a door. Somewhere in the distance of the Manor, a door slammed. Narcissa lifted her wand, and sent a hex towards the sound of slamming. Nearly a minute later there was the sound of a faint yelp, from Draco.

Narcissa slipped her wand into a cleverly concealed pocket sewn into the skirt of her robes, and then smiled at the girl. Hermione, feeling suffocated, turned a stricken look up at Narcissa. "Oh dear! You look positively blotchy. Come along, Hermione." The elegant woman quickly ushered Hermione through an archway and towards a small door carved with twining ivy over an oak tree. The door swung open at their approach and Hermione found herself in a

beautiful solarium filled with green plants. At the center were comfortable chairs where the witch led the little girl.

"Sit down, my dear. I think you can breathe here." Narcissa observed Hermione as her colour returned to her cheeks. Narcissa's lips thinned. "Draco should have brought you through the family entrance, Hermione. The grand entry is all for show and we really only open that part of the manor for events."

"It's really... beautiful," Hermione said quietly.

Narcissa smiled and sat across from Hermione. "Oh quite beautiful, but rather too much, I'm afraid. I find it can be most intimidating." She laughed gently. "One must be wary of one's skirts or the wrong move might send a small statue crashing to the floor!" After several long minutes, and a glass of water, they left the solarium via another door that led into a comfortable parlor.

The parlor was still beautifully decorated, but Hermione's keen eye could tell that this was a room frequented by the Malfoys on a regular basis. As she watched, four house elves came in carrying a large evergreen. The house elves began to set the tree up in a corner near the fireplace and in front of a tall window.

"You have a lot of house elves, Aunt Cissy," Hermione observed. She rarely saw the house elves at Hogwarts but had spoken a time or two to Draco about the use of house elves by wealthier families. It made her slightly uncomfortable.

Narcissa noted the child's odd expression as Hermione watched, worriedly, as the house elves worked. "You disapprove of them, my dear?" the witch asked shrewdly.

"Are they happy?" asked Hermione.

Narcissa glanced at the four house elves. "They are doing what they wish to do. Is that not a basis for one's fundamental happiness?"

"But, Draco said the house elves are bound to you. You own them. That's slavery!" Hermione clapped her hand over her mouth at the implied insult.

The older woman drew Hermione's hand down away from her mouth. "I do not deny that some of the older, Pureblood families treat their house elves horribly," she sighed as she thought of her own mother's penchant for torturing their house elves, and then beheading them, and creating a grim tapestry of the mounted heads on one wall. "The bond is not like that, though. It comes about from trust. It is a trust that the witch or wizard will care for the house elf as the house elf will do all in its power to care for whom they are bonded to. A house elf will protect their witch or wizard, it will keep their secrets..."

"But they aren't free," said Hermione softly. "I read that a bound house elf can only be free if it is given clothing." Hermione recalled mentioning how silly that was to her dorm mate, Millicent, but the girl didn't seem to care one way or the other how ridiculous that was.

Narcissa laughed at that. "You must have gotten that from Hogwarts: A History, Hermione. That was a tradition begun by Salazar Slytherin when he bound the first house elves to Hogwarts. Those house elves agreed to accept clothing as a way of breaking the bond. There are any number of ways to sever a bond between wizard and house elf because it all depends upon the bond that a house elf is under." She paused, then leaned a bit closer to Hermione. "That is usually a family secret."

Hermione was still not convinced that binding a house elf wasn't against the creatures best interest. With a sigh, Narcissa led her out of the parlor. "This holiday you will need to visit the library, my dear. Lucius has collected quite a few books about elves that you may find enlightening. Now, come along. I wish you to see your new bedroom."

As they walked, Narcissa explained that they were in the south wing of the manor. It was a cozier wing that Lucius had had added on to the main house after he wed Narcissa. The old part of the manor was far too large for his comfort, and in his opinion, it really wasn't a place for any family to live. This smaller wing held a library, Lucius' study, Narcissa's study, a kitchen, dining room, the parlor that Hermione had seen, the solarium, bedrooms for Lucius' family and a few extra guest bedrooms, Draco's old nursery, and a separate, glassed in gazebo that sat in the rose garden that served as a tea room for Narcissa and her lady friends.

Narcissa's features reflected her silent anticipation as they ascended the staircase, then moved down a pleasant hall where they passed the closed door of Draco's room, then a bit further down, the Malfoys bedroom, and finally at the end of the hall to Hermione's room. The matriarch of the Malfoy family, soon to be four instead of three, opened the bedroom door, and waved Hermione inside.

Hermione felt like she had just been put down in the middle of a fairytale! Blues, and golds, creams and ambers, velvet, silk, and satin. The girl was almost afraid to move for fear of disturbing such beautiful things. Yet, just when her heart began to twitch with sadness that this room, as lovely as it was, was not the one she had grown up in, she noticed something spectacular. All of her awards and certificates, the ones that she had so cleverly hidden from her mother beneath her bed, were on the walls, or shelves. Books from her childhood, the few her mother had let her keep within sight, lined some of the shelves, too. Every single one of her silly stuffed animals, one of the few things her mother approved of (because girls were supposed to love stuffed animals) were spread about the room.

Everywhere that the child looked she saw amongst the gorgeous trappings touches of her childhood that Narcissa had had her house elves rescue from the Granger residence. The elves had discovered the many nooks and crannies in her old bedroom where she had hidden treasures such as the awards, including her rock collection, her own drawing of the periodic table, the colourful crystals she had grown from household chemicals; everything that had marked Hermione as an intelligent, and inquisitive child.

Holding onto a cherished copy of Pippi Longstocking, Hermione wiped away at a happy tear, then turned and rushed over to Narcissa and wrapped her arms around her waist.

"Thank you so much, Aunt Cissy!"

Narcissa, ignoring the two tears that fell onto her cheeks, draped her arms around the girl and hugged her close; reveling in Hermione's joy.

Portkey, Apparation, Floo travel. Harry decided that the wizarding mode of travel had a lot to be desired. This time he and his father had traveled by what Snape had called 'Portkey'. The portkey was a

locket that his father wore around his neck and although Snape had whispered the word to activate it so Harry wouldn't hear it, Harry was sure he had heard the word 'Lily'.

At the moment Harry was sitting on the frozen ground wondering if his stomach hadn't taken off someplace. The portkey had been an awful feeling of something snagging his belly button and yanking it back through his spine. Snape handed a Stomach Soother down to his son who shot a dark glare up at him.

"You should have warned me, Dad!" Harry snapped.

"Portkey is best approached by a new wizard without any expectations, Harry." He watched as his son drank the potion and then bent over slightly to slip his hands under his son's arms and hoisted him up quickly. To elicit at least a smile from the boy, Snape lifted Harry so his feet dangled a moment above the ground, and then he settled the boy back on his feet. "It's too cold to be sitting on the ground. Let us go."

Snape guided Harry down the hill that was scattered with wisps of melted snow, towards a small, white washed cottage with a thatched roof. As they walked through the wintry meadow with its sparse, straw like grass and scattered rocks, pebbles, and a few impressive boulders, the boy could see that the cottage wasn't far from an extreme precipice. Before going to the cottage, Snape indulged his son's curiosity by taking him over to an edge of the cliff. Beneath them was the glassy, blue-black surface of an immense lake. Harry stepped back so rapidly that he trod upon his father's instep.

Snape grimaced at the sharp pain, but it was released quickly as Harry realised what he'd done. He grasped one of Harry's shoulders firmly. "I have put up wards to protect you, Harry, but even so I want you to be careful when you come outside."

"Where are we, Dad?" asked Harry.

"We are upon one of seven islands that exist within Loch Danna'Duir which is the loch that feeds the Black Lake at Hogwarts," explained Snape as he turned his son away from the cliff and towards the plain cottage.

"So we're not far from school!" exclaimed Harry.

"Precisely," agreed Snape.

As they reached the front door, a cold wind stirred up from the cold waters of the loch. They both shivered. Harry wrapped his arms tightly about himself as Snape took out his wand and muttered an incantation beneath his breath.

"Harry? Son." Harry looked up at his father. "Put your hand, palm flat, against the door."

"It's cold, Dad," complained Harry as his teeth chattered, a bit exaggeratedly.

"Just do it, Harry," Snape insisted firmly. Harry obeyed his father and pressed his hand against the door. There was a sudden corona of soft, orange light around his hand, and Harry giggled at the ticklish sensation. "Now you will be recognised by Lacewing Cottage, Little One. Let us go in and get warmed up."

Snape pushed the door open and he ushered his son into the cottage and then he followed.

The main part of the cottage was one large room that served as sitting room, parlor, study, library, and dining room. A large fireplace burst to life at their entrance and Harry ran over to a comfortably worn, tapestried sofa in front of the fire to warm himself. Snape left his son where he was, but waved his wand, easily divesting Harry of his Winter outerwear which he hung up on wooden hooks on the other side of the door. The Potions Master then added his own cloak, scarf, and gloves to the other hooks before joining his son at the fire where he stood with his back to the flames.

After several minutes of quiet, Harry broached the silence by asking, "Do we have to go to Paris tomorrow, Dad?"

Snape glanced down at Harry questioningly. "Is there a reason you wish not to go?"

"Well, you already said we aren't gonna do our Christmas shopping there, and we already got our dress robes, so what are we gonna do while Hermione and Mrs. Malfoy are doing all that girl stuff?" He

slouched down in a slightly bored effort to touch his dangling feet to the floor.

Snape managed an invisible sneer with a heavily aggrieved sigh, "We are going to accompany Lucius and Draco. Narcissa's singular, and rather obsessed approach to shopping is painful to men, everywhere." He gave his son a small smirk. "It is a great sacrifice upon ourselves, Harry, but I believe you would agree with me that this is something friends do for each other."

Harry grinned and nodded from his odd, slumped position on the sofa. His father pointed a slim finger at him, and with somewhat narrowed eyes, he indicated that the boy needed to right himself on the furniture. Harry complied and was soon back in place.

"Are we gonna..."

"Going to," interrupted Snape. "Stop speaking like a bumpkin, or I'll start assigning words out of your dictionary."

"You can't do that!" protested Harry indignantly. "I bought that book which means it's a fun book and that means it's not a school book so you can't assign stuff from it!"

"Ah!" teased Snape. "So school books are not fun, then."

"Nope..." Harry frowned as he quickly reconsidered that statement. To be honest, some of his school books were interesting, maybe even fun. "Okay, so maybe some are fun. But, Transfiguration isn't."

"You do not care for Transfiguration very much, do you?" Snape asked his son seriously.

Harry glowered at the flames as he began to thump his heels against the edge of the sofa. "Well, I don't like the book because it's all filled with this theory stuff that makes no sense at all. And all the drawings... well, they look sort of neat, but I don't know what they mean. Then, when we try to turn something into something else, I know I'm saying the spell right! I got good pro... nun... ciation." Harry smiled at himself. He had found that word in his dictionary recently, but hadn't had a reason to use it yet.

"You did very well in turning your button into a beetle," observed Snape. That was on their last test, which Minerva had already told Snape that Harry had great difficulty with, although he accomplished most of the test's practical.

"Not really," Harry shrugged. "It took me eight tries to do it, and then, when I tried to turn it back into a button, I sort of squished the beetle by accident." He grimaced. "Professor McGonagall clucked her tongue at me."

Snape nodded as he recalled when he was a student taking Transfiguration tests one of the worst things to hear was Minerva's tongue clucking. It meant you did not do well.

"Transfiguration is a very difficult skill to master, Harry, and you cannot be perfect the first time around," said Snape as he moved away from the fireplace to sit beside his son. He winced as the corner of one of their shrunken trunks in his pocket poked his hip. He shifted so they weren't.

"Hermione's perfect at everything!" Harry snapped out with obvious jealousy. He thumped back against the sofa with his arms crossed tightly over his thin chest.

"On the contrary," objected Snape smoothly. "Miss Granger has her own difficulties in some of her classes. Transfiguration, for her, is an exception. She is, undoubtedly, quite a natural at the discipline."

"Yeah, I know, cuz she's always explainin' stuff to everyone and it gets really tiring," Harry complained a bit further.

Snape's lips thinned in disapproval at his son's persistent jealous attitude, "If I knew Miss Granger to be boasting, you know that I would say something to her. However, I do believe that in your study group all of you selected Miss Granger to be in charge of that subject as she does have an innate grasp of the matter."

Thump. Thump. Thump.

The Potions Master put a restraining hand on his son's thigh to get him to stop thumping his heels against the sofa. "I see no reason for your complaint, Harry. If you want to be better at Transfiguration, then you need to practice, and you need to ask if you need help in



understanding the theory." He nudged his son. "Enough sitting, and no more jealousy over your friend's accomplishments. It is a disagreeable habit." When Harry didn't immediately move from the sofa, Snape held out his hand. Harry grabbed his father's hand, and allowed himself to be slid off the sofa and pulled to a stand. He then followed his father from the large main room to a short hallway.

Creamy White pine doors marked two bedrooms and a bathroom at the end of the hallway. Snape indicated that the door on the right was to his bedroom and the one just across from his was Harry's. He opened the door and showed the boy into a rather plain, whitewashed room that held a bed, some shelves for books and knick knacks, a desk, a wardrobe, and a night table by the bed. A wide window faced the loch.

"It is rather plain, but I thought you might enjoy practicing some of the spells from here," Snape held out a book to his son. His eyes held a reserved glitter in them as he hoped Harry might find practicing from Beginner Design Spells enjoyable.

Harry took the book and flipped through several of the pages. Some of it was Transfiguration, which he felt his heart plummet at seeing, but some of the design spells were more advanced and dealt with conjuring objects out of thin air; something Harry found fascinating.

"There's no theory stuff in here," observed Harry.

"Although I do believe that a fundamental understanding of Transfiguration is necessary for everyone, it is not entirely required to cast many spells, especially these." Snape paused, still not certain if his son was happy with the decidedly educational gift. "If you would like, we may work on this together."

Harry beamed at that. He really wanted to do something, anything, with his father. "Can we give me some curtains first, Dad?" He didn't say so, but the young boy wasn't fond of the blank darkness that usually shown through an un-curtained window.

Snape removed Harry's new trunk from his pocket, Engorged it, and levitated it into the bedroom. "Unpack first, then come back into the main room for dinner. We will do a bit of decorating afterwards."

"Okay, Dad!" Harry went into his bedroom and smiled at all of it. Even though it was plain, and not yet decorated, he was happy with it. His bedroom! Just think, he mused as he ran to jump on the bed and test it, I only had a cupboard before, now I have a dorm, my own bedroom in dad's quarters in Hogwarts, and my own bedroom here! Harry bounced just a bit, but sank into a down featherbed on top of the mattress. It was very thick, and he couldn't help but grab a portion of the featherbed to pull over on top of himself so that he was neatly buried.

"Harry! Stop playing and unpack your trunk!"

Harry scrambled from beneath the featherbed, thinking his father was right in the doorway, but he wasn't. He frowned, wondering if his father was one of those parents that had eyes in the back of their heads, and could see through walls.

"I'm unpacking, Dad!" shouted Harry as he opened his trunk.

Unlike most young boys, Harry did not just empty his trunk and stuff everything into the bottom of the wardrobe. From a very early age he had learned, beneath his Aunt's shrewish tongue, to hang or fold clothing. He neatly paired his socks and tucked them into one of three drawers in the wardrobe. He then neatly stacked his pants, and folded his white undershirts for a second drawer. The third drawer remained empty.

Once Harry was finished with his clothing, he put his school books that his father told him to bring along with him, onto one of the bookshelves. His ink, quills, and parchment all went into the desk.

The desk quickly became a pleasant thing to explore. It was an old rolltop desk of oak in which the sides were carved with dragons. One drawer held a set of keys that allowed the owner to lock the rolltop over the surface. Upon the desktop surface, on each side and towards the rear of the desk, were small drawers that Harry had to open and close. They were mostly empty. In one small drawer he found a carved bear that was about three inches in height. Harry took the bear and placed it on the desktop. A few more drawers were opened and he discovered a carved penguin, a very well done raven, down to a suggestion of feathers, and lastly, a coiled snake. The next thing he found were some small shells with a larger Cowrie shell. Harry scooped those out of the drawer and put them with the

carved animals. The last bit of treasure the boy discovered was a bunch of dried lilac tied with a green, velvet ribbon. He took the lilac out of its drawer very carefully and put it with the other treasures.

Harry then picked up the carved animals and the shells and dropped them into his pockets. He then picked up the lilac and left his bedroom.

"Hey, Dad! Look at what I found!"

Snape had brought very little in his trunk and so it took only a few swishes of his wand to send everything to either his wardrobe, or his night table, or his potions cabinet. Once he had unpacked, he left his bedroom, went into the large main room, and then into the small kitchen.

The Potions Master had sent a pair of house elves to clean up the cottage and to stock the larder with food. In minutes he was cooking a simple stir fry with rice for himself and his son.

As he cooked he gave a bit of thought to tomorrow's trip to Paris. It wasn't a trip he wanted to make, and the truth was, it would be the first time Lucius and he spent time together, as fathers.

Snape and Lucius had begun as wary enemies that had come to nothing as the heir to the Malfoy estate was in his seventh year when Snape had just arrived at Hogwarts. Lucius, ever with his eye upon possible, future connections, had seen something in the rather ragtag, half-blood, but Snape had wanted nothing to do with anyone; other than the pretty Lily Evans.

Happenstance had brought the two together in, of all places, the library at Hogwarts. Snape, the Studious Snake, as he had been dubbed in Slytherin House, always retreated to the library when he wanted peace. He had not expected to find the aristocratic, Malfoy snob behind a stack of books, mostly rune magic, that would bury a Thestral.

Snape had feigned disinterest, but a few of the books had come from the Restricted Section and he could not help the many furtive, and covetous looks that went to the books. Nor could he stop the questioning glances at the young, pale wizard whose brow was beetled over an obscure, Egyptian text.

Despite the older wizard finishing school, and just as quickly wedding his contract bride, Narcissa Black, Lucius Malfoy made good on a promise to teach the young, intelligent Slytherin what he knew of rune lore and rune magic. It was a subject that Snape found almost as fascinating as Potions, and such old magic opened up a facet of Potions that the young wizard had not expected.

A wary (on Snape's part) friendship grew between the two.

Snape was always cautious around Lucius because the older wizard did present a false front to the world. That mask was deceptively charming, devious, and hid an opponent that could be brutal when it came to business negotiation. Lucius had outstripped his father before he was 21 when it came to increasing the Malfoy estate and he had many more contacts than the older Malfoy did. Abraxas, who patently avoided all contact with Muggles refused many of the valuable contacts Lucius cultivated in the Muggle world.

It was one of many reasons that when Abraxas fell ill to Dragon Pox, the cure for an adult that was highly sought after by those felled by the pernicious disease, and astronomically expensive, was not at hand for the Lord Malfoy.

Snape could not fault Lucius for wanting his own father dead, nor for helping along the deadly disease that took him in the dead of Winter. After all, Abraxas had not only sentenced his son to a lifetime of servitude to a psychotic mad wizard, but Abraxas had done so to Snape, and dozens of other young men who should have been pursuing careers, and raising families. Abraxas' could also be blamed for the deaths of both witches and wizards who had either tried to leave the Dark Lord, or had displeased him in some simple manner.

It was, perhaps, after the death of Abraxas Malfoy that friendship between the two men became more solid. Lucius feared for both his wife and son; who were demanded by the Dark Lord to become part of his 'family'. The war was also escalating as was the depravity of the Dark Lord and a small number of his followers who were just as sadistic as Voldemort was.

Snape literally had fallen into the role of a spy for Dumbledore when he realised that Voldemort chose to allow his life to be ruled by a

prophecy Snape himself had stupidly passed onto the megalomaniac. Lucius had no such recourse and could only work silently, and with many of his Muggle contacts, to prepare a path to freedom. Yet, together the two men worked, without acknowledging the other, to save those innocents that they could, or to mercifully end their torture.

After the supposed fall of Voldemort, Lucius had gone home to his freedom, escaping the touch of Azkaban and even gaining a bit of prestige in the Ministry. Snape did not escape Azkaban, and spent three months there while Dumbledore promised him release. Snape did get his release, but he was not out from under the manipulative thumb of Dumbledore. The old wizard still thought he had some hold over the Potions Master, but he did not realise his own huge blunder; in vouching before the Wizengamot and the Ministry that Severus Snape was an innocent man, the Headmaster had implicated himself in any supposed criminal acts committed by Snape during his time as a spy.

Snape smirked at this thought. Should Dumbledore ever try to put Snape back into Azkaban, the old fool would have a cell right beside him, for having sanctioned Snape's criminal acts!

"Hey, Dad! Look at what I found!" Harry came trotting into the kitchen. He held out the lilac just as he father turned slightly so he could keep one eye on the stir-fry.

Snape motioned Harry to the counter next to him and his son put down the bunch of lilac, removed the shells from his pocket, and the figures. Upon seeing the carved figures, Snape put down the long fork he was using to stir dinner and he picked up the penguin. He marveled at the little carving, astonished to see the figures he had not seen in years.

"I thought my father threw all of these away." Snape then put down the penguin and touched the dozen or so shells with his fingertip before picking up the cowrie shell. Suddenly waving a Stasis Spell over the stir fry, he conjured a chair in the small kitchen and sat down heavily upon it. He then Summoned the bunch of lilac.

"Where did you find these, Harry?" asked Snape, his voice uncharacteristically tight.

"There's a desk in my room and I was just looking at all the little drawers and these were in it." He picked up the cowrie shell. "Do you know what they are?"

"Well, the little figure carvings..." his throat tightened and he swallowed to loosen it. "My... my father taught me how to carve them. He... one night... I thought they were all gone."

Harry, sensing that his finds had stirred up difficult memories for his father, put the shell back on the counter and walked over to lean comfortably against Snape's side.

"Where did the shells come from, Dad?" Harry asked gently.

"When I was... four, I think," he gave his son a watery, bittersweet smile. "My parents and I went to the seashore. I had never seen the ocean before and was rather afraid of it. My father took me..." Again his voice choked with long, thought dead memories that he tried to fight back. Drawing in a controlled breath, Snape continued, "All three of collected lots of shells that day. These, like those three figures, were ones I gave to my father at the end of the day."

Snape closed his eyes tightly as he gripped the fragile bunch of dried lilac in his hand. A few of the tiny blossoms were crushed by the force of his grip. Suddenly he dropped the lilac, rose from the chair and strode out of the kitchen. Harry recovered the lilac, and then trotted after his father. He found Snape in his bare room, staring at the rolltop desk.

"That's my father's desk," Snape said simply as Harry stepped hesitantly into the bedroom.

"Dad? Are you okay?" asked Harry with worry. He was afraid he had done something wrong.

"You needed a desk," Snape began, still staring. "I did not think it practical to purchase one since I was certain that my vault at Gringott's had a desk in it, so I asked the goblins to send it here." He stepped, almost timidly, towards the desk and brushed his fingertips across its surface. "It never crossed my mind that it would be his."

Harry stepped beside his father, still worried, and puzzled. He had never heard his father speak about his own father, unless it was in

clipped, dismissive tones. His father was still staring at the desk and Harry was becoming more worried every second.

"Dad!" Harry backed away swiftly as Snape turned sharply and glared down at the little boy. When the glower showed no sign of fading he moved rapidly to the other side of the bed, his eyes darting for possible escape routes if he needed them.

"Get out!" growled Snape, his slim finger pointing at the door.

Harry didn't hesitate. He scrambled over the surface of the bed and darted out of the bedroom. He jumped as the door slammed shut after him.

Harry had not seen his father in such an odd temper since... since he couldn't really say when. He was still worried, but he was scared, too. Snape had walloped Hermione in front of everyone. Even though he had said he would never hit Harry, adults just could not be trusted all the time.

Harry yanked his coat, and his scarf, and his gloves down from the hooks on the back of the door. Quickly slipped them on, and then went outside.

Outside of the cottage it was a lonely, desolate, and almost flat countryside. It was also cold, and despite being bundled up, Harry knew a cozy fire was so much better. Running, though, would warm him, and so he did. He ran away from the cliffs, hoping to come across someplace he could hide. He didn't want to stay away forever, but there was no way he wanted to be around his father's odd temper. There was no way for him to gauge which way the wind blew there and it was best, for him, to hide until the anger, and the old memories, whatever they might have been, were gone.

It was the slamming of the bedroom door that wrenched Snape from his childhood's past. Old, pleasant memories of times before his father had been laid off. Before the drinking began. Before he and his mother became outlets for Tobias Snape's drunken rages.

It was in that moment that Snape realised he had yelled at Harry. He closed his eyes, and pinched the bridge of his nose, angry at himself. He had stupidly drifted into the past, and then, ashamed at the

darker memories that brought up, he had rejected his son's concern, and verbally pushed him away.

Snape opened the door and walked into the large, main room. "Harry, I am so..." he stopped. Looking around he saw that his son was not to be seen. Another look and his gaze settled upon the hooks behind the door. None of Harry's outer Winter clothing was to be seen. With a curse, at himself, Snape Summoned his cloak, gloves, and scarf, and left the cottage in search of his child.

The land didn't remain flat forever and in his running, Harry came across a jumbled field of stones and boulders that led to an equally rocky upslope. It was to his good fortune that there was a small indentation in the rock that he could slip into. Not even a cave, it was the perfect size for the small boy and worked well as a shelter against the wind that was growing outside. Harry tucked himself together, pulled his cloak tight around his shoulders and prepared to wait out his father's temper. He never suspected that even within the shelter of the cave, the cold would still seep into his bones, drawing his temperature slowly down. After almost a half an hour, Harry closed his eyes, not even realising he was giving himself up to the icy arms of Winter.

Snape fumed angrily as he looked over the nearly flat expanse of land that the cottage sat upon.

"How can a boy get lost in this?" he demanded of himself knowing that he should not have let Harry get lost in the first place.

For the third time he cast a Warming Charm. The wind was no brisk breeze, now. It whistled up from the cold loch like ice and Snape bet there was a storm in the air.

Fortuitously, Hedwig arrived at that moment after her long trip from King's Cross. She settled for a moment on Snape's shoulder and he absently scratched her soft breast as he continued to move further and further away from the cottage. After several minutes, the Potions Master grumbled at himself.

"You are the boy's familiar," Snape spoke to the owl. "Perhaps you can locate him."



Hedwig hooted and launched herself from the wizard's shoulder. Snape watched as she flew low to the ground and then a bit higher upon reaching a stretch of rocky ground up ahead. He was able to keep watch until she landed upon a slope of slate rock and hooted frantically at him.

Snape made his way quickly and carefully through the scattering of rocks until he came to the sloping rock and the small opening that Hedwig say above. Casting Lumos to light the end of his wand, Snape bent down and was able to see, right away, that his son was curled up in the small dent of rock. Stretching out his hand, he touched the boy's pale blue cheek, and cursed himself again.

Tucking the wand into his sleeve, Snape pulled his son, who was now unconscious, out of the small cave. In seconds he had Apparated into the cottage and had Harry laid out on the sofa before the crackling flames of the fireplace.

After spelling a few potions into the child, Snape Ennervated Harry. The boy blinked wearily. He was wrapped up in an afghan and a quilt with the fire burning hotly. His father was seated beside him, glaring at him. Harry tried to sink completely beneath the blankets but Snape stopped him.

"It would have been much simpler if you had simply gotten mad at me instead of going out into the cold to hide," chided Snape.

"I'm sorry, sir," Harry whispered.

"As am I," Snape added and Harry blinked in astonishment at his father.

"How come you're sorry?" Harry blurted. "I'm the one that upset you, and then was more stupid by running outside."

Snape sighed, his gaze rolling up towards the ceiling briefly. "I am sorry for having yelled at you. Those... trinkets that you found stirred up some memories I thought had been very much buried."

Harry's fingers worried the edge of the afghan for a moment, and then he looked up at his father. "Dad? Was your dad mean to you?"

Snape was quiet, but then he began to speak quietly. "My homelife was a turbulent one, Harry. We did have a few good years and that is where those little treasures came from. I was very young when I gave them to my father. It... shocked me to learn that he kept them. Even after... everything that happened and when I could not even recall that at one time I loved him, he still had them in that desk." Snape bowed his head slightly as one hand rested suddenly against his heart.

"It's good that you have some nice memories, Dad," Harry said simply.

Snape lifted his head, and looked upon his son, giving him one of his rare smiles.

A/N: I really had hoped to get to the shopping in Paris, but I felt you all were waiting just too long for this chapter. So, the next chapter will be Paris, and two fathers with their sons, and then the Winter Ball. Remember how Dumbledore, that skunk, sold the Potter assets for the war effort? Lucius has a Christmas gift for Harry.

Hermione's Naming Ceremony will happen as well. She will be permitted to change her middle name and last name. Any suggestions for a middle name?

Anyway, I hope you enjoy and I thank each of everyone of you for staying with this story. There are no plans to abandon it, and since the Summer is finished, it seems I will be writing this through the Winter. Will that suit all of you?

Oh yes! Almost forgot - for anyone interested, I have a Professor Snape Tumblr blog where members, and anonymous folk can ask the professor a question. It can be found here [http: / professor-snape . tumblr . com](http://professor-snape.tumblr.com) / If you are a Tumblr, please Follow the professor.

Sunday, December 22, 1991

Hermione loved her room, and she loved the wonderful Malfoy library and its climbing balconies to a second and a third floor. Of course, she wasn't allowed up on the third floor, for those were the books and scrolls that the Malfoys had collected over centuries of the families existence that dealt with the Dark Arts and old magics that had fallen either out of use, or out of favor in the present.

Seated upon the window seat in her bedroom, Hermione sat before a large tome. Her legs were crossed and she was hunched over the book with a Muggle notebook on her lap, but an Always-Linked Quill scratching out notes in her precise cursive. After several minutes she leaned back and sighed down at her notes.

"Too many," she sighed again, rubbing the fingers of one hand against her temples.

There came a knock on her open door and she looked up as she smiled shyly at Narcissa Malfoy. Narcissa walked in and sat down gracefully upon the unoccupied side of the window seat.

"I begin to see what Severus meant when he said 'a book was as a third limb to you', Hermione," smiled Narcissa as she leaned over to look at the large book.

Hermione blushed and gave her soon-to-be mother a smile. "I love books."

"A love of books is a fine thing, child, but your are a growing girl who needs fresh air, just as a growing boy does." Although Narcissa's tone was mild, it was firm and Hermione drew in a breath, ready to protest if her book privilege was going to be taken away again. Narcissa frowned, and any protest Hermione was working up, was bitten back. "Fresh air, play, and time spent in other pursuits, I see, will need to be a rule for you." To take away the sting, the older witch held out her hand for the notebook. Hermione handed it over, a bit sullenly.

Narcissa studied the notebook a moment. "Muggle?" she asked.

"I was saving up for a few of those great research journals that are spelled to copy notes to be saved into a permanent journal."

Hermione shrugged. "I don't have much left in my vault, though. Da' had it converted and nearly cleaned out a few days ago."

Narcissa nodded. Hermione's Gringott's vault had only been a mere allowance that was connected to her parents finances. It was inevitable that the girl's father might do something retaliatory such as making Hermione destitute. Saying nothing, for she knew of many plans, besides the adoption, that her husband was working on. Instead, she opened the notebook, which had only been used just recently.

Hermione's notes were neat, organised, and titled. Narcissa smiled at seeing the largest title that read, 'Names I Like'.

"So, you're thinking of the Naming Ceremony," mused the older witch.

"I have a lot to choose from, and some that I like more than others..."

Narcissa interrupted softly as she read a few names from the 'Most Liked' list, "Morgan – the Healer of Avalon, Alexandria – the famous library," Narcissa chuckled at that one and added, "She is also the Protector." Hermione smiled at that. "Narcissa continued, "Nidia – the gracious child." Suddenly Narcissa's eyes lit up. She turned the notebook around and pointed to a name that Hermione had put several stars beside. "Is this a favourite?"

"It has so much meaning," Hermione said softly. She continued, "Faith, hope, wisdom, courage."

"So much of what you are, my dear girl." Narcissa cupped the girl's cheek gently, "Although you are free to choose, I believe this name embodies well, all that you are." The witch rose, and touched Hermione's shoulder. "Now, as fascinating as all of this is, I need you to get dressed. Severus and Harry should be here momentarily."

As the witch left, Hermione closed her book, put her notebook on her desk, and went to the wardrobe to take out her Winter clothing. She smiled at the luxurious, soft suede cloak that was trimmed with white fur as it spilled from her wardrobe. The cloak, with matching hat, gloves, and a cashmere silk scarf, were all early Christmas gifts from the Malfoys bought just a week ago at Madam Malkins in

Diagon Alley. The Muggle coat that had been given to Hermione by her mother, had been deemed both age inappropriate, and garish for the girl. It was a simple, yet terribly pink, down quilted thing with the gloves attached by cord to the sleeves.

Hermione had hated the pink monstrosity, but it had been warm, and it had also been all that she owned. It was gone now, replaced by the suede ensemble which came with very nice, and toasty Warming Charms.

Draco had seen the new outfit and had promptly pitched a fit, demanding that he get a new Winter outfit, too! Lucius, seeing Hermione back to Hogwarts, had simply glared at his spoiled brat who apologised at once. It didn't stop Draco's sulking, though. He kept up a good sulk until they went to dinner that evening. By then he was over it, and even managed a sincere compliment to Hermione on the new clothing.

Since their arrival at the manor, Draco was too enthused over showing Hermione the family wing. She did not know that Lucius had given his son a short talk about the 'crassness' of showing off the Malfoy wealth and had then forbidden Draco's access to the formal wing – that part of the manor that had been built, and added onto by his ancestors.

The family wing of Malfoy Manor had its share of wealthy opulence, but under Narcissa's eye, and magic, it was beautiful, elegant, yet comfortable for a family to live in.

Going down the stairs, Hermione met her family in the parlor where Harry, looking a bit green after Flooing, and Severus were just arriving. She watched in concern as Harry, who started out bent over, gave in and just sank down to his knees on the floor.

"I really wish wizards used cars," he groused as he held his belly.

Snape knelt down and gave Harry a dose of Stomach Soother. "I am getting concerned about this dizziness, Harry. You have traveled by Floo enough times that you should have gotten used to it." He helped his son to his feet. "I think it might be a good idea for us to see Madame Pomfrey."

Harry took a deep breath. The potion worked quickly and he was feeling much better. "Can we after Christmas, Dad?" asked Harry. "I don't want anything to ruin the holidays for us."

Snape, the worried parent, was dubious about putting anything off if it meant the health of his son was neglected, but he grudgingly supposed that in this case it wouldn't hurt. He nodded, "Right after term starts, then, and I will not want to hear any arguments then."

Harry nodded, and then smiled as the last of the roiling in his tummy faded away. Lucius then smiled widely, to take in his family, and his two guests.

"Before we start our day," he cleared his throat, suddenly, and oddly nervous as he pulled a scroll from within his robes. "Severus, Harry, as Narcissa and I consider you both a part of our family, and I am sure that Hermione considers her friend as such," he glanced over at the little girl whose eyes were riveted to the scroll. "we thought you ought to be a part of this." With a small, yet dramatic bow, Lucius handed the scroll to Hermione.

All of them watched, with nearly held breaths, as Hermione broke the seal on the scroll and she unrolled it. As she read the words, the colour in her cheeks deepened, and then she finally let a bright grin grace her features. She then began to jump up and down, and she let out a shout, "I'm a Malfoy!"

Hermione ran over to Narcissa first, and hugged her, crushing the parchment between them. She then did the same to Lucius before showing the scroll to her Head of House. Snape inclined his head, "Congratulations, Miss Malfoy." At the widening of her gaze, he smirked.

"Hey, 'Mione," said Harry pointing towards the bottom of the scroll. "There's a line above your name that's empty."

Hermione had missed that. Indeed, above her old signature of 'Hermione Jean Granger' there was a line above it that appeared to be missing something. She glanced up at her new parents in puzzlement.

Narcissa explained, "After your Naming Ceremony that is where you will sign with your new signature."

"Oh." Another bright smile suffused her face. "I can't wait!"

Draco pressed a bit closely, and possessively against his father and Lucius glanced down at his son. His nudge was a reminder of the talk they had had the evening the two children had arrived, and Narcissa had bestowed the gift of the Winter clothing. The young boy, the only child in the home, was worried about his place in the family now that Hermione was joining it. Draco loved Hermione, as Harry did, and he had wanted Hermione as his sister. It was another thing, though, for the young boy to see it actually happening.

Lucius had punished Draco verbally, at first, for his unseemly temper tantrum, and had not fully understood why his son had gone off the way he did. It was as Draco, standing in the corner of his father's study, began sniffing that Lucius wondered if their weren't more to the outburst.

"Come now, Dragon," sighed Lucius as he put down his quill and turned in his chair towards his son. "I have done nothing to have put you in such a state. I didn't yell, nor did I spank you, since you have told me you are too old for such 'babyish' punishment."

Draco, firmly turned to the corner, only sniffled again. His breath then hitched in a caught sobbing hiccup. Lucius had never liked to hear his child cry and this not only plucked at his heart strings, but puzzled him, as well.

"Draco." Lucius sighed heavily at another sniffle. "Dragon, turn around and come here."

Draco did turn, slowly, and bowed his red-rimmed eyes away from his father's concerned look. He walked over and sat primly in the chair on the side of his father's large desk. He sniffled again and Lucius gave the boy a handkerchief.

"Will you tell me what has you so upset, child?" Lucius asked with great concern.

"It's dumb, papa," replied Draco as he blew his nose.

"So it may be, but it has you in quite a turmoil, therefore it does not matter how trivial it may seem to me. Now why this tantrum, and

why these tears?" Lucius leaned forward to give his son his full attention.

"It's just... you aren't, are you? I mean I'm yours, right? Uhm... but, I don't know... and it's all..." Draco shrugged with frustration, and Lucius frowned. He was unable to make sense of what his son was saying.

"What do you mean, 'I'm yours'?" asked Lucius carefully. That phrase stood out from all the nonsense.

Draco lifted his grey eyes to those that were the near mirror of his own. Instead of explaining what he meant, he suddenly blurted, "Do you and mother still like me?"

Lucius would have laughed at the silly question, but Draco's fear was nearly a palpable thing in his voice and it disturbed him, instead. "Of course we do! Why would you ask..." and then it dawned on him just what the problem was. "Dragon, do you believe that you are less in our eyes since we have adopted Hermione in our family?" Draco shook his head, vehemently, then nodded, miserably. Lucius motioned for his son to come to him, and he scooped the boy up and into his lap the moment his seat left the chair. He embraced Draco tightly who wrapped his arms around his father's neck, and wept.

"Sweet Merlin, Dragon! You are our son. We shall not stop loving you, nor shall we love you any less. I promise you this."

"I know, papa," he sniffed, and used the handkerchief again. "I said it was dumb, and it is. I'm glad Hermione's here, but I just kept feeling this..." he leaned back, and held his fist to his chest to help explain himself. "It just hurt here, and mother really likes Hermione a whole lot, and you... you..." he glanced down at the handkerchief in his hand.

"Did I do something wrong?" asked Lucius as he lifted Draco head by his chin.

Draco scowled, and then spat resentfully, "You asked her first how her grades were!"



Lucius and Draco spoke for the rest of the evening as Lucius assured his son that he was still loved and wanted, and that there was no reason to be jealous of Hermione.

With another nudge to his son's shoulder blades, Draco stepped forward, and smiled at Hermione. With true sincerity, he said, "I'm glad you're my sister, Hermione." He then added, with a smirk, "But I'm your big brother!"

Travel to Paris was by portkey which Harry weathered decently since he already had ingested the Stomach Soother Potion. They then had a short walk up a lightly, snow-dusted avenue of the wizarding side of Paris which Narcissa informed them was called Village de Phoenix. Translating the name was very easy.

Rather more peaceful than its busy, tourist laden counter-part, the wizarding side of Paris appeared lost in time, as so many places that wizards and witches lived tended to be. Rather Dickensian in nature from its buildings to even the quaint signs on those places of business, it didn't have the dirt and squalor that was so prevalent in many of Charles Dickens stories.

The streets were festively attired and there was even a group of cherry-cheeked carolers that were strolling slowly along, singing in the holiday season. Along the main avenue that they were walking there were booths where one could get all sorts of delicacies from sweets to savories. Snape automatically said 'no' about the sweets the first time Harry asked, and was promptly thwarted by Lucius who purchased cinnamon glazed apple slices for all three children. Snape fumed while the two Malfoy parents both smirked and smiled respectively. At least he could console himself with the fact that it was only a few slices of sugared apple in a small, but pretty container that vanished itself once empty.

Madame Elianne's salon looked no different than any of the other shops on the street. Once the small group walked through the doors, though, they found themselves in a profusion of the most exquisite fabrics, a chaos of dresses being sewn magically, and Elianne herself bustling about as busy as a faery.

"Narcissa! Lucius! So good to see you!" Elianne stood just barely four feet in height, part of that being her smart, red leather, lace-tied boots with elegant heels. Her hair, held up in a soft bun, was

absolutely snowy white. Elianne's eyes were a gentle, but discerning umber, and her skin was slightly wrinkled with her age.

Elianne patted Narcissa's hand and grinned in delight, "I've put aside four hours for you, Narcissa. I do hope that will be enough to take care of your young lady."

Harry's eyes widened and silently he mouthed, 'four hours?'

Elianne looked with studious appraisal at Hermione, frowning briefly at the child's bushy hair. Narcissa was teaching Hermione several spells to help tame her hair, but she hadn't quite mastered any of them, and honestly, she had forgotten to ask Narcissa with help that morning.

Elianne startled everyone, but Narcissa, as she firmly clapped her hands together. "Well! Time to get started, my girls!" She then glared at the four men. "Out with you four. Shoo!" she waved her hands as though she were herding hippogriffs out of her salon. "Out! Go make yourselves busy!"

To Snape's irritation, the door to the salon was rudely slammed shut in their faces. Before he could say anything, Harry let out a big huff of air. "Thank goodness! What do we get to do, Dad?"

Snape did reply, but not before crossing his arms over his chest and glaring at Lucius. "You are in charge of this outing, Lucius," he glowered. It appeared that there had been no need for he and his son to have come to Paris. "What are we going to do, since Madame Elianne obviously does not wish for us to hang about?"

Lucius smiled disarmingly, and Snape actually felt a bit unnerved by it. He scowled. The older wizard offered as an explanation, "Le Cirque de Merveille."

"The Circus of Wonder?" asked Snape. "We are going to a circus?"

Draco let out an ear-splitting crow that even had his father glaring at him. Harry wanted to yell, too, but was a bit afraid to do so around the adults. He just smiled up at his father, "It sounds better than shopping, Dad."

Snape sneered, but his son could see the hint of amusement in the dark man's deep gaze.

"It IS better!" Draco jumped once, grinning at Harry. "They do all these really fantastic acrobatics and they're wizards and witches so they don't need nets, but it's still really scary, and... there's lions, tigers, and...!" Draco continued to chatter endlessly about the highlights of the magical circus as the two wizards followed behind.

"You've never experienced Le Cirque de Merveille, have you, Severus?" asked Lucius.

"I have gone to a circus, Lucius," Snape replied dryly. "The straw makes me sneeze, the lions are old, the clowns are sinister, and the high rise acts could do with an accident or two just to liven up their dismal performances."

Lucius let out his rich laughter. "Oh, Severus! Sometimes I think your Muggle heritage has completely soured you upon wizardly pursuits! Le Cirque de Merveille is nothing at all like a measly, Muggle circus. There is sophistication, elegance, and most definitely thrills for one and all."

"And how came you to learn of this dubious entertainment?" asked Snape. He glanced ahead of them and saw that both boys were still yammering contentedly non-stop.

"Narcissa and her love of culture," smirked Lucius. "Very early on, not long after Draco was born, my dear wife complained about the time I spent in the library when it would be better spent 'showing my son' the world." He then sighed heavily. "Not that it was a time when I felt there was anything to show Draco."

Snape simply nodded. The Dark Lord was at the height of his power and showing less of the charismatic wizard, and more of the megalomaniacal creature that wanted immortality and the world, to his followers. Abraxas Malfoy was soon to succumb to Dragon Pox and Lucius would be left in the very precarious position of salvaging the Malfoy estate from the excesses Abraxas put it under, and dealing with the Dark Lord who still expected Malfoy money and political savvy to further his cause. Snape, himself, was finishing up his Potions Mastery, dealing with a conflicted soul as far as his

inveterate stupidity in joining Voldemort's followers, and to top it all off, then came the fateful Prophecy that changed all their lives.

To move his thoughts from those dark days, Snape indulged in a bit of memory that gave credence to the side of Narcissa that treasured wizarding traditions, and explored the side of wizarding life that was often overlooked. Muggles did not have the monopoly on creativity and imagination that was sometimes thought. There was music, theatre, art, and more. Some of it was to be found meshed naturally with the Muggle world, but the wizarding world had its own theatres, and museums, and places that were just for wizards to enjoy.

One of Narcissa's loves was to engender more interest in the Wizarding Arts than there was. Young witches and wizards left school generally to become Aurors, to work in the Ministry, or to work in a shop or a trade. Very few of the large, and well known places of learning, such as Hogwarts, Durmstrang, or Beauxbatons, introduced students to art, music, or theatre in their curriculum. Narcissa hoped someday, perhaps after the threat of Voldemort was gone for good, that she could introduce the Arts to Hogwarts and help shape it into becoming a more rounded school for all things wizard.

Until then Narcissa was encouraging everyone, including her husband and his friend, to learn more about the Arts and culture of their wizarding birth. Lucius had all the Pureblood manners he had been taught from birth, but Narcissa would have him leave the library and take their barely a year old son to an art exhibit, or theatre, or other such entertainment. Then, she would also pull Snape, who was often in the Malfoy library as well, and teach him etiquette, brush up his courtly manners (so well that many thought he was Pureblood on sight), and to dance.

Snape never revealed to Lucius, for surely the man would have chained him up and forgotten him in one of Abraxas' dungeons, but the Potions Master had developed a schoolboy crush on the lovely, blonde-haired witch during his dancing lessons. Narcissa, perceptive witch that she was, knew of Snape's crush and did not embarrass him over it. She simply reminded him how in love she was with her husband, and that was the end of that.

The crush had long since been safely buried deep within Snape's mind with the other, few pleasant memories he had protected with

his Occlumency. As for Narcissa she was still trying to match him to an 'eligible witch'. Hence, her own push at introducing Snape, and Lucius, and Draco to all cultural events possible. Many of which, by the time he was older, he bowed out of.

"Looking for a way out, Severus?" asked Lucius with a knowing glance towards the dark man who had been quiet and lost in thought for several minutes.

Snape scowled, briefly, at Lucius then turned his gaze towards his son who currently had his nose pressed against the large display window of a Quidditch supply store. Draco was right beside Harry.

"I think my days of 'looking for a way out' are rather numbered, would you not agree?" asked Snape.

Lucius smiled slyly and spoke under his breath, although he knew the younger wizard's sharp hearing would pick up his muttered, "Especially if dear Cissy has anything to say about it."

In reply, Snape grit his teeth and moved forward swiftly to walk beside his son, leaving Lucius behind him. Lucius, of course, was laughing richly at the Potions Master's expense!

Madame Elianne bustled around Hermione like a miniature whirling dervish as she took measurements and gave the young girl fabric and colour swatches. Narcissa smoothly would take the fabric and colours from Hermione. Some she held onto, others the older witch discarded. After only fifteen minutes of this, Hermione was feeling exhausted just watching the dress designer continue her flutterings around her. For a brief moment she recalled Madame Elianne's words that she had put aside four hours for them!

Narcissa caught the tell-tale slump in Hermione's shoulders and spoke up, "Hermione, come over here."

The seamstress looked up at Narcissa as the older witch's tone signaled that it was time to end the measurements. Hermione, looking for a way to get away, was more than happy to seat herself on the yellow velvet chaise, that was one of three in salon, beside Narcissa.

"What do you think?" asked Narcissa as she laid out several choices of colours upon her lap.

Hermione studied the swatches before turning up her eyes in question. "There's no pink." Anything fancy that Hermione had ever had was always in pink since her mother was the one who always decided what looked good on her daughter.

"Pink?" inquired Narcissa. "Oh no, dear girl! You haven't the colouring for pink to be a complement." Hermione's features seemed to crumble under a mis-perceived insult. Narcissa caught her almost-daughter's chin lightly between her fingers. "Your skin is like warm porcelain touched with a pleasing blush of rose to your cheeks. I know you aren't fond of your very curly hair, but did you know it is more than just brown?"

"It is?" asked Hermione tugging down a curl to examine it a little awkwardly.

Narcissa ran her fingers through a few curls. "It is more a russet highlighted by amber and softly shaded by deep red." The older woman smiled. "It really is quite beautiful and your lovely eyes are a perfect match."

Hermione did not know what to say to the compliment; there were so few she had ever heard that were sincere in her life. She just blushed and moved a bit closer to the older witch.

"What colours do you like, Hermione?" asked Narcissa.

As Hermione studied the palette of colour swatches with the same intensity she studied her books, Narcissa watched the girl beside her.

There had always been that hope that someday she and Lucius would have another child together. Despite the rumours that persisted, Narcissa was not an "ice-queen" and had very much enjoyed being pregnant. Lucius had been a proper, conciliatory father-to-be as he often trailed behind or beside Narcissa as she walked (or on some days, waddled) the gardens of Malfoy Manor.

Much of her pregnancy discomfort was taken care of by potions, a few that Lucius had Snape brew as their efficacy proved better than that of a Potions Master Lucius frequented from New Zealand.

The delivery, eased by magic, and more potions, though, had been unusually long, and difficult. When Narcissa had passed out, Lucius, who had been down in the parlor (home births with a midwife still being a long-held tradition) had fainted as well. Snape had been there, feigning a great annoyance, had been able to revive the concerned father. Lucius, upon recovering his senses, broke with the traditional taboos concerning the sanctity of the birthing room against men, and had promptly burst through the door and to his wife's side.

It would be days later that both the midwife, and the Healer from St. Mungos would tell Narcissa and Lucius that a second child could result in Narcissa's death.

Yet, despite a possible death sentence, they had continued to try. As each year passed with no sign of a second child, Narcissa doted on her son. However, to be truthful, at least to herself, Draco was his father's son; sometimes to a fault.

As Hermione held up, tentatively, a few colours, gold, blue, and green, Narcissa impulsively hugged the girl, and then cupped Hermione's face in her hands.

"You are such a blessing, my dearest child!" Hermione blushed, not entirely sure what had brought on the effusion of emotion. As Narcissa hugged her again Hermione hugged the older woman back, content in the knowledge that someone loved her just for herself.

Snape would not admit it. Not ever. He was absolutely amazed by the artistry of Le Cirque de Merveille! He would say, and he had admitted this much just a few minutes ago to Lucius, it was not the circus he had expected.

As a child, when things managed to get too difficult at home, Snape would run away; at least for a few hours. The one time he had run away for more than a day had so distressed his mother that his guilt had eaten him up inside.

When he was six there was a time, after one of his father's futile and useless exercises at job-hunting, when the arguments became so volatile that his father was throwing his fists while his mother was throwing every breakable possible against the walls. It was a war-zone and young Severus ran, and ran, and ran with the intention of never returning.

Severus' running had been interrupted by a circus that had set itself up in a dusty, old field that developers probably had meant to build on, but with the closure of the factory and further closures of businesses, it had just lain fallow.

At first, Severus was curious by all the Muggle trappings, the glitz, glam, and glitter, and he really liked all the animals. He did feel sorry for the tiger, though, who, instead of looking ferocious, only looked tired and old.

No one stopped his stealthy wandering amongst the busy circus folk and he went everywhere that a six year old could. The exploration ended though when Severus was nearly scared out of his skin by an exaggeratedly made-up face with an overly large, red nose, a garish mouth, and mad eyes.

The clown had been a friendly sort except that he had a terrible habit of laughing like a hyena, and after just a few minutes in the company of the clown, Severus' notorious temper was getting the best of him, and he left.

Snape, in later years, dealt with a different sort of mad clown, and masks, that were often, in public, full of charm, but with their fellows, they were frightening. He developed an understandable dislike of clowns.

At Le Cirque de Merveille there were clowns, but they were hardly in the caliber of those in the Muggle Circus. These were not clowns, in Snape's eyes, but elaborately costumed performers who did everything from dancing on the Invisible Wire, to a remarkable ballet in the air, on brooms that were as colourful as any of the performers.

As fascinated as Snape was, he mostly enjoyed the expressions that passed over his son's face as Harry watched the spectacle. There were oohs and ahhs aplenty just as there were gasps, and spontaneous relieved bouts of applause after a particularly executed



leap, or jump, or acrobatics enhanced by magic. What he found even more... endearing... was that Harry, after several minutes of sitting beside Draco had moved to sit beside his father so he could ask him, "Did you see that, Dad?", "Isn't that amazing, Dad?", and his favourite, "We need to learn that spell at school, Dad!"

The highlight of Le Cirque de Merveille was an impressive duel that began in the darkness and was opened by spirals and dancing impressions of magic; ribbons, glitter, sparks, and beams. Two elaborately dressed combatants, one in pristine white and wearing a silver crown upon its head (whether they were witch or wizard, no one could tell) and one all in dark sparkling grey with a silver crown that twisted terribly, were on the center stage. As the two rulers battled, more supporters, in white, or in grey joined in the battle not just from the ground, but the air as well.

As spells struck, there were explosions, and bangs, along with a cacophonous accompaniment of music. Not an eye in the audience was elsewhere as the great battle was fought in a well choreographed, dizzying dance of life and death. At last the ruler in white was triumphant as the ruler in grey was struck by a spell of silver and gold that caused him to burst into a shower of silvery grey ash. The theatre was rocked by the thunderous explosion that rumbled every seat in the house.

Harry let out a yelp and Snape's lap was suddenly filled with what he expected, was frightened boy. Glowering as the lights dimmed briefly and then returned with the triumphant white ruler and his army, Snape took out his wand and cast a very low Lumos so he could look down into his son's face. He was surprised to see that Harry's cheeks were flushed with excitement, and his green eyes were large and bright, still dazzled by the faux battle below them.

"Wow!" breathed Harry as he turned to look over his shoulder at the now bowing performers, both white and grey.

Snape, although pleased that Harry hadn't panicked, frowned with displeasure. The battle, for him, had been all too reminiscent of smaller duels that had gone on between Voldemort's followers and the Aurors before the deaths of Harry's parents. It brought home to the Potions Master that in their future there would be a battle between Light and Dark – assuming the Dark Lord could not be dealt with now. However, in that battle, many might die, and would

not return to take a bow. It weighed heavily upon Snape's heart and quickly he hugged his son before all the lights went on to allow the audience to leave.

Lunch was at a small restaurant that was redolent of Spring, in the midst of Winter. The two boys ate their sandwiches with chatter interspersed that relived the circus. Snape had settled on a very bitter espresso that he had slipped a Calming Potion into. Lucius had noticed this furtive gesture and over his vichyssoise he carefully watched the younger wizard.

Lucius did not regret his choice of entertainment for his guests although he honestly had not expected such melancholy from Snape. After all, he looked upon the battle, one he had seen in various forms with Draco, as a catharsis. He took it as a reminder that, eventually, the Light would triumph.

Snape worried, though, at the memories the faux battle had stirred up. Harry, babbling happily with Draco as boys will over such theatrics, was innocent of what such violence would come to mean in his young life if Voldemort was not swiftly dealt with; once and for all.

"Severus," Lucius had risen and Snape glanced up at the pale wizard.

"Dad?" Harry asked, looking to his father to see if everything was all right. Draco echoed the glance by looking up at his father.

"Papa? Is everything all right?" asked Draco.

"Dragon," said Lucius retrieving his purse from his pocket and taking out a small handful of sickles. "You and Harry go and get whatever you'd like for pudding. I need a word with Severus. We'll meet you outside."

Draco, happy for the excuse of anything sweet, jumped up and headed for the pretty counter that held all the extravagant puddings on display. When he noticed Harry wasn't with him, he skidded to a stop, turned around, and jogged back. "Harry!"

Harry stood, but paused as he looked up, again, at his father. "Dad?" he asked a bit more softly.

"Go on, Harry. Lucius and I are just going to talk."

Assured by his father, Harry followed his friend. Snape stared worriedly at his son until Lucius tugged uncharacteristically upon his sleeve. Annoyed, yet wondering what the older wizard wanted, the Potions Master followed to the outside of the restaurant.

"What..." began Snape with irritation in his voice, but was quickly interrupted.

"You can be very depressing at times, Severus," scolded Lucius. Snape glared darkly in confusion. "Let Harry be a boy and forget about the past." He was met in reply with only another scowl. Lucius gave the younger man an icy glare. "Don't think that you're the only one with nightmares, my friend. You recall, mine are very similar to yours."

"So you are saying I should forget the past and blithely face the morrow?" snapped Snape testily.

"All of us should be so fortunate to forget the past," Lucius replied softly. "But that is not what I meant. Our futures are not written in stone and that great battle that Dumbledore seems to anticipate between Harry and the Dark Lord will not come to pass if we have anything to say about it."

"No, it shall not, Lucius. I do not want Harry to grow up with my nightmares. You saw him as he watched that battle. He was crowing with the crowd, unconcerned at all that such battles are real." Snape's voice lowered with his frustration. "Time and time again they occur, and death is not beautiful light, and spirals of glittering hues. It is bloody, and frightening, and there are no corpses to rise, unblemished, free of terrible wounds, and ready for a new day."

"So," smirked Lucius with a sly twist to his mouth, "you would put the nightmares in your son's head just to save him from what others might do?"

"Would you care to twist my words further?" sneered the younger wizard. "I want to protect my son from the truth, but neither do I want him to revel in falsehood; to become some Gryffindor that does not stop to think about the reality ahead of him." Snape suddenly spun

away from Lucius and walked a few steps down the path as he drew his Winter cloak tighter about his shoulders. He then turned, and paced back. "I do not know what to think," Snape bit out slowly under his breath. "I wish to keep Harry from such things, but at the same time I do not wish to paint the truth in pretty pageantry." Pinching the bridge of his nose, he bowed his head, allowing his hair to drape over each side of his face. "Voldemort wants my son dead, and Dumbledore wants to turn Harry into a martyred saint for the Light. I simply want what he desires for himself, Lucius..." Snape slowly lifted his head and stared into his friend's icy grey eyes. "I want him to just be Harry. A little boy that likes to draw and paint, to fly on his broom, to play with his friends, to study hard, and to make good grades..."

"You want what any parent wants for their child, my friend," Lucius spoke quietly as he glanced into the restaurant and saw Draco paying for his and Harry's puddings.

Feeling pained, and conflicted inside, Snape refused to show it and glared stoically at Lucius. The older wizard's hand, again on his sleeve, gripped his arm suddenly, and tightly.

"This is a time of difficulty, Severus," hissed Lucius under his breath. "We are as we once were; distrusting of others, and sometimes of each other. Yet, we are also parents and those are our children. Regardless of the storms surrounding us, we must do all that we can to make their lives normal whether that should be Little League Quidditch, or a special pudding, or the spectacular sight of a fantasy battle." Lucius let go of Snape's forearm. His posture stiffened as he tugged with exaggerated needlessness upon the glove on one hand. Forcing a deliberately insincere, false cheer into his voice, Lucius smiled indulgently and spoke loud enough for passersby to hear, "I know it is in your nature to be a dour, dark man, Severus, but do make an effort for Harry." His voice held that charming mien that so often irritated Snape as it was more often than not aimed at those Lucius felt beneath him. "We have an hour and a half before we meet the ladies, and Draco has been desperate to visit Gepetto's Toy Store."

Snape sneered at Lucius, insulted by the 'public chiding'. A sudden, hard glare just barely masked by the 'publicly charming' smile was directed in warning at the Potions Master. "Act nice, Severus, or I'll be forced to tell the boys how well you sing Frère Jacques."

Snape neither laughed, nor smiled at the jibe for he knew that although it sounded ridiculous, and harmless to a witch with her two daughters walking by, it was not made in jest. Lucius would underline his point next with the most vexing hex possible if Snape didn't shape up and end the melancholy.

Snape gave a sharp, acknowledging nod to the older wizard just as the boys emerged with their puddings; ice cream confections despite the chilly, Winter air. Lucius showered the two youngsters with delight at their choices and gathered them each to either side of him and nudged them up the snow brushed cobbles.

"There is a wonderful toy store, Harry, that I think you'll find fascinating," began Lucius as his voice faded quickly while the three wizards walked ahead.

Snape, allowing his grimace to remain in place, mostly out of sheer stubbornness, finally let out a heavy sigh. Lucius was right. Snape could not give Harry the normal childhood he wanted if his father were always concerned with the shades around them. When he was alone, or with other adults, Snape would worry, but when he was with Harry, he would be there for him; as his father.

Brushing at a dusting of snow on his cloak, the Potions Master shoved his worries about the pestilential past behind his Occlumens shield and strode forward to meet Draco, Lucius, and Harry. Lucius gave him a quick, sidelong glance.

"Gepetto's, Severus?" asked Lucius, although Snape could hear the implied threat to behave himself, or else ringing in his mind.

The Potions Master ignored the elder Malfoy as he stepped up beside his son to walk beside him. After several moments, Snape felt his heart ease just a bit as Harry, perceptive as ever, slipped his gloved hand into his father's, and smiled up at him, and then lifted his ice cream in offer.

"Would you like some, Dad?" asked Harry. "It's cherry cordial and strawberry cream."

Snape hated Gepetto's Toy Store. All the children squealing and oohing and ahing and shouting for parents or siblings attentions

was the chaos of the Welcoming Feast at Hogwarts a dozen times over. The noise was added to by the toys themselves; a unique disturbance where things ticked or tocked, played silly melodies, squirted messy things, or belched smoke. They flew in the air, dipped past his ears, or trundled close enough to his feet along the floor to very nearly trip him.

A child, though, was at ease in the store with all the amazing things to see, to watch, or to participate in. For a grown witch or wizard Gepetto's was an exercise in extreme patience, of which Snape had very little of.

It did do him some good to watch as Harry had leapt into the fray with all the other children. Still, he kept as close an eye as possible on the child. Harry still flinched at accidental touches, and he was still very wary of all adults that he didn't trust. Not necessarily a bad thing, in Snape's mind for such watchfulness could make a wizard rather skilled. However, in Harry, until he could control it, the flinching, the need to run and hide, or the flashbacks, only made the boy vulnerable. Snape noted that Harry kept close to Draco, and did not let his father out of his sight.

A glance at the patrician informed Snape that Lucius was an old hand at this toy shopping business. He had somehow managed, without casting a spell, of creating a little island of peace around himself where no one, child or wayward toy, passed.

Snape swatted at a wooden fairy that tugged rather viciously upon a lock of his hair. The insipid toy giggled.

"If you were a real fairy," he snarled under his breath at the taunting, flitting toy, "you would have teeth that could chew the bones of your enemies." In reply, the wooden fairy tittered, and just before Snape could swat at it again, it whirled out of reach.

Hating all things whimsical, Snape peered over all the shorter heads beneath him for sign of his son, or of Draco. He could see neither and grimaced knowing that he would have to venture further into the joyful mess ahead of him.

Harry could not get over the magnificence that was Gepetto's Toy Store. The circus was really special, but one could only view it from a seat in the audience. At the toy store, one was right in the middle

of all the glittery and noisy splendor. Slyly taking his cue from Draco, Harry touched, lifted, examined, and finally activated the toys before him. A Whirligig flew up above them and belched out a cascade of rainbow sparkles that faded before anyone was touched by them. Two, small knights on horseback were set by Draco into a joust while a garish Fool leaped about giggling madly. Harry didn't quite care for the Fool. He seemed a bit creepy with his overly made up face and maniacal laugh.

As they moved deeper into the store, Draco's chattering became a faded drone, that soon vanished all together.

Harry's attention had been caught by a fine set of inks with seven quills tipped with silver nibs of varying sizes that were meant only for drawing. Draco, having no interest in all the artistic supplies surrounding them had allowed his own attention to be taken by the miniature Quidditch players that were modeled after real, professional players. He'd been collecting them since he was ten and they were only sold exclusively by Gepetto's.

The drawing set really was something exquisite and Harry could not turn his gaze away from it. The ink bottles were nearly rounded baubles of crystal with flat bottoms. The colour of each ink shown through the crystal giving each bottle the appearance of a faceted jewel. The caps were of filigreed silver dragons, each one different. The bottles, it was noted in a scribed note on the inside lid of the box that housed the drawing set, were spelled to be Non-Spill Bottles. The inscribed description also noted that each quill had been handmade by the master artist, Pierre Sojourn of Giverney. An example of the artist's own work adorned the lid of the box. The pen and ink drawing was of a beautiful wheat field dotted with colourful, tiny flowers, and a quaint little church of old stone in the distance.

Harry sighed. Opening the box once more, his eyes drifted over each bottle, each quill that was made from a different feather from owl, raven, dove, gryphon, hippogriff, pegasus, and a Russian firebird. Very shyly Harry's finger stroked the beautiful, glowing, flame-like firebird feather.

"Harry, there you are!"

Harry jumped at the unexpected sound of his father's voice behind him. He turned and smiled, and Snape noted the brightness in his son's viridian gaze, the excited flush on his cheeks.

"Isn't this great, Dad? There's like... everything here! And more, too...!" Harry babbled a few more incomprehensible sentences that were suddenly all strung together.

"Harry. Take a breath before you hyperventilate," ordered Snape sternly.

Harry drew in a quick breath and tried to tell his father about a set of stones that a child could build... whatever it was, it was lost once more in excited, childish babble.

Snape caught Harry by his shoulder. "Harry. Breathe like I taught you for your lessons. Now."

Harry huffed and let out a moue of displeasure. He knew his father was implacable at times, so it was best just to humour him. So, Harry breathed, a bit too erratically at first, but after a pointed glare from his Dark Man, he concentrated on breathing properly.

As his breath went slowly in and out, the flush faded from Harry's cheeks, looking less feverish. Finally, Harry smiled. He did feel better. Not so much like he was going to float away like one of the dozen or so miniature air balloons that drifted about the toy store.

"Dad," Harry whispered softly, still grinning. "This store is fantastic!"

"Better than, oh say, Quality Quidditch Supplies?" smirked Snape.

For just a second, Harry looked conflicted as he tried to divine the right answer. After awhile, he shrugged helplessly. "Well, Quality Quidditch is the best at what they do, but for toys, I always want to come here." Turning, he touched the beautiful drawing set one last time. He knew it was terribly expensive, with all that silver, and feathers from magical animals.

Snape nudged his son away from all the art supplies. "Go find something for today, breathless idiot." Harry grinned, and as he turned back to the milling crowd of children calling out for Draco.



Lucius stepped up beside Snape to see Harry and Draco now going through a box of Witch and Wizard Collectible Cards.

"Ahh, Severus Snape in a toy store," jibed Lucius. "Wouldn't that be a photo opportunity for an intrepid journalist?"

Snape sneered pointedly at the man beside him. "As if Lucius Malfoy in a toy store would not be such a coup as well."

Lucius laughed and clapped his hand against Snape's shoulder. "I've had practice, Severus. Toy stores, Quidditch stores, ice cream parlors, sweets shops. I'll have you know that it is quite an ordeal to maintain one's dignity while one's child is in their notion of Heaven."

Snape huffed and crossed his arms over his chest. A little girl bumped solidly into him and he glared down at the child. As she looked up at the imposing wizard, all dressed in his usual black, her mouth opened into an 'O', and her eyes widened. "Mummy! Mummy! It's a real vampire!"

Snape, most certainly insulted, hissed at the girl, and she turned tail to disappear back into the chaos of children. Lucius laughed, holding his hand against his belly as he wiped a tear from one eye.

"If I were a vampire," snarled Snape at the ridiculous patrician beside him, "I would cheerfully drain every drop of your pristine blood." Three more children, overhearing the Potions Master, squealed in fright and ran. Snape smirked.

Once outside of the salon, Hermione allowed herself to look at everything possible around her. The entire street had been decorated for Christmas with evergreen, holly and ivy, endless, colourful lights. She smiled at the sight of all the shops with their pretty displays to tempt the eye, and then her gaze lit upon a bookstore. She started over to it automatically, but stopped herself since she had been told to wait. She did wait, but not once did she take her eyes from the unassuming shop.

As Narcissa emerged from the salon, she saw just where Hermione's eyes were mesmerised. She touched the girl's shoulder to break the spell. "We need to eat a little lunch first, Hermione, and then, if you wish to visit the bookstore, we shall."

Hermione was a little disappointed at having to wait, but she did admit that she was rather hungry after all that dress shopping. Who would have thought that would be such a tiring thing to do?

Even after Gepetto's and meeting up with Narcissa and Hermione at a dusty, old bookstore, there had been more wandering about to do. Harry felt that the Malfoys might never stop shopping and just before dinner the exhaustion of each child had manifested in cranky tempers. The worst had been a bickering joust between Draco and Hermione over a pretty bauble that when put in the sunlight caught the light and fractured it into kaleidoscopic patterns of colour. Harry had ignored his two friends while Lucius broke up the fight as he drew his children out of the store by the collars of their cloaks. Narcissa said it was time to return to the manor, and they did so. By then, Harry had been hoisted up into his father's arms, fast asleep.

The adults made quiet farewells, and Snape went through the Malfoy Floo, and back to the cottage where he put his son to bed, and then himself.

Monday, December 23, 1991

The next day heralded more shopping as Snape and Harry went to Hogsmeade for Christmas shopping. Snape had never bought anyone other than Draco a gift for the season. Snape also had never put much thought into the simple toys he bought through owl catalogue and assumed that those toys were long gone. With Harry in his life now, Snape discovered that, by his son's expectations, he was now obligated to purchase gifts for EVERYONE! Snape quashed that exuberant declaration that morning by telling his son that he would get something for Narcissa and Lucius, and then for Draco and Hermione, and that would be it.

Hogsmeade had been as crowded as Snape expected. After trudging to store after store that began to feel all alike after two hours he was ready for a nap. Harry was ready to go to more stores. He knew that Harry had finished his shopping and was probably bouncing off of the sugar plums he had consumed at Honeyduke's. It was time to take his bouncing boy home, and to get some calming dinner into him.

The two Snape's had just finished their dinner and were relaxing by the fire. Harry was looking around the big main room of the cottage while Snape had his nose in some Potions periodical.

A small sigh caused Snape to pause in his reading. When nothing seemed to follow, he went back to the article describing new advances in Potions. He was about a third of the way through the article when another sigh, this one a bit more forced, broke his concentration. Snape glanced up at his son who sat on the sofa, his eyes lazily trailing around looking at the walls of their abode.

"Something on your mind, Harry?" he asked with a knowing smirk.

"Kinda bare in here," the small boy said in his best nonchalant manner that caused Snape to smirk.

Snape gave the large main room a cursory, sideways glance. "Really? I had not noticed. Do you think we need a painting or two? Something from our in-house artist?" Snape gave his son a brief wink and Harry grinned.

"I can do that, Dad, but you know? It's Christmas. Shouldn't we have a tree and some blinking lights?" Harry's tone was doing its best to be serious and casual in the asking, but as Snape regarded his son, he was able to note a tautness of self-restraint in the child's bearing, and a look of hope in his son's eyes.

It was that hope the Potions Master knew could easily be shattered by his wrong answer. The hope in the small boy's eyes had been there, year after year, dimming with each year that his horrid relatives withheld the simple joys of Christmas from their nephew as some sort of punishment for his existence. That fragile hope that fairly thrummed ever so perceptibly through Harry's body would never show, to anyone, ever again, if Snape did not say the right thing.

Snape would not hurt his child for the world, and so he allowed a slow smile to grace his face as he put down the periodical. "Have you ever harvested your own Christmas tree, Harry?"

Harry's eyes lit up beautifully as a smile broke through that hope, that wish that had finally been answered the way he had always wanted to hear it. He practically leapt off the sofa, ran toward the

hook where his cloak, hat, and gloves waited, and was dressed before his father could even take a breath. Harry snatched down his father's Winter clothing and ran over to him with his bundle.

"Now?" asked Snape, caught a bit off guard. It was only just after seven of the clock, but he had hoped to get his son calmed down and ready for bedtime, not traipsing around the country looking for a Christmas tree.

"Where are we gonna get a tree, Dad?"

Harry hadn't quite answered his blurted question, but Snape did get the point in his son's eager voice and body language. A tree was needed. Now.

Snape didn't hesitate as he rose and dressed himself warmly. He then paused for a moment, thinking of a place that had trees, and that would be open at this hour of the night. Pulling Harry to his side, they vanished from the cottage.

Snape had to admit that Christmas when he was a child had held little meaning for him until he'd met Lily. His father was often too drunk around the holidays to really be aware of what was going on around him to do anything approaching festive. As for his mother, Eileen seemed to always choose Christmas as the time to bemoan her fate, and the loss of her own wretched family that wanted nothing to do with her.

The Evanses, though, were happy to include young Severus in their Christmas activities. While Severus learned from Lea how to make spiced pumpkin pie, Lily taught her friend how to make strings of garland from popcorn, cranberries, and small pieces of fragrant, dried orange. About a week before Christmas Day, Gus Evans had Lily and Severus bundle up warmly (Petunia was too busy for such a childish thing) and they drove a few miles in Gus's truck to a locally owned Christmas Tree Farm.

Lily and Severus would run between the snow-dappled trees, examining each one to be certain they found just the right one. When it was discovered, Gus cut down the tree and then the three of them hauled it back to the large barn where the tree was wrapped in a swirl of plastic netting. Before leaving, the three of them sat in

the barn with other families, drinking down hot apple cider to warm up their insides.

Snape didn't know if the tree farm still existed, so, on the off chance that it didn't he had Apparated a fair distance from it. The sign of cars parked outside of an old, crooked wooden fence that divided the tree farm from the long, country road, was a sign that the tree farm was still in business. Harry grabbed his father's hand with a whoop, and before Snape could snatch at his disappearing dignity, they were both running towards the Christmas Tree Farm.

Once through the gate, Snape reigned in his dignity, and his breath, and caught his son. "Slow down, Harry," he smiled as he drew in a few controlled breaths. "There is a lot to do here. Barn first," and he pointed toward the tall, red structure that dominated the farm.

Harry did his best to cool his enthusiasm, but just barely. His eyes went from the barn, to the tops of dozens of trees just to the side of it, to families that were loading up their tree into their cars. The families were laughing, some were singing carols.

"Deck the halls!" Harry sang, a bit off tune. "La la la la la!" He grasped his father's hand again and tugged, just a bit. His father was walking too slowly towards the barn.

Snape winced as more 'Deck the Halls' hopelessly jumbled up with 'White Christmas', and something about 'chipmunks roasting on an open fire' assailed his ears.

"Happy Holidays!" called a cherry cheeked woman with her white hair in a soft bun. She held out a gingerbread cookie each to Harry and to Snape.

Snape took the gingerbread shaped like a whimsical man, and then studied the old woman. He was a bit surprised to realise that this was the same woman that had greeted he and Lily when they were children. She had been slimmer, back then, and her hair had been a mousy brown, instead of white.

"Mrs. Doran," Snape greeted the woman.

Her grin widened, making her apple cheeks rounder. She then squinted a bit at the tall, dark haired man before her. Recognition dawned slowly in her eyes. "Oh my! If it isn't little Sevvv!"

Snape scowled, and his cheeks coloured as he coughed at the nickname he had not heard in years. He really had not expected the woman to remember him, and it rather mystified him how she did from only a few visits, one each year until he and Lily parted at the age 15.

"Severus Snape," he corrected, a bit formally. He then felt an insistent tug on his hand, and he drew his son forward in front of him. "My son, Harry. He has never gone tree hunting before."

Mrs. Doran bent slightly to pay attention to Harry. She put out a gloved hand. "Very nice to meet you, Harry."

Harry hesitated, but then took the proffered hand. "Nice to meet you, ma'am."

Mrs. Doran rose, and placed her hands on her hips. "Never been a'tree hunting, eh? Now why was that?"

A bit awkwardly Snape offered as explanation, "We live near the school where I work and there was not a tree farm nearby. Since I was showing Harry where his mother and I grew up, I decided that a trip here was in order."

"Well! It's never too late to learn," laughed Mrs. Doran. "Come into the barn, Harry and we'll get you started." She held out her hand and Harry took it and walked with her, a half skip in his step as they walked. Snape followed, watching his son.

Snape was given a hand saw for taking the tree down, and a small Muggle torch since it was already dark and there were no lights over the trees. Then he and Harry were pointed to a section of the farm where everyone was to do their tree gathering. Snape was very critical of each tree, but Harry was quickly glancing at each tree before dashing to the next.

"How about this one, Dad?" asked Harry. He was grinning, probably wider than Snape had ever seen, and his cheeks, and nose, were red from the chill in the air, and the excitement.

Snape studied the tree Harry had pointed out. "It is rather tall," he said with deep consideration.

"Is it too big for the cottage?" Harry had unconsciously adopted the same studious position his father was in.

"I think we need something just a bit shorter," Snape suggested with a drawl. "A bit rounder, too? What do you think, Harry?"

Harry's lips thinned at the tree, then nodded. "Yeah. Okay, Dad. Can I have the torch?" Snape handed over the Muggle contraption and stepped back as like a startled rabbit, Harry sprinted in zig-zag fashion around at least four more trees. Snape, knowing it would be fruitless to try and keep up, stayed in place, smiling placidly amongst the trees, as he waited for his son's inevitable shout.

Twice more, a similar scenario was played out until the absolutely perfect tree was found. Snape, who had no intention of using the Muggle saw, made sure that there was no one to see his actions as he pulled his wand from his sleeve, and delivered a precise Cutting Spell that severed the tree from its roots. As it fell, Harry dodged out of the way. Snape caught the tree, and then with Harry grasping firmly upon several branches, they dragged the tree to the barn.

One of Mrs. Doran's hired workers came over and hefted the tree over his shoulder, and for a moment Harry was stunned by the man's strength. "I've never seen Hagrid do that!" he gasped in awe.

Snape quipped, "The Hogwarts trees tend to be much bigger than our Keeper, Harry. I think even he might be crushed beneath one of them if he tried that way of carrying them."

Harry snickered, and Snape smirked. They then watched as their tree was put top first through a mechanical machine that wrapped the tree in white plastic netting quicker than one could blink.

"Goin' fer some cider?" asked the big, burly Muggle.

"Yes," Snape replied. "I think we shall."

The man nodded as he snatched a large red tag from a pile of tags. "Name, then?"

"Snape!" supplied Harry. He watched closely as the worker wrote their name in black marking pen ink, then tied the tag onto the tree, and tossed it into a pile of trees. "Thanks, sir!" smiled Harry, once he was sure no one could take their tree.

The worker handed over a receipt to Snape, and instructed, "Ye can pay fer yer tree after yer cider, sir."

Snape gave the man a nod, and then directed his son over to the big red barn. They were met by Mrs. Doran who smiled and directed them over to a rough hewn, round table made from the bottom of a barrel. Two smaller barrels had been fashioned into crude chairs that Harry and Snape seated themselves in. Before they knew it they both had their hands cupped around large, steaming mugs of cinnamon spiced, hot apple cider.

Harry smiled over the rim of his cider at his father. "This is great, Dad."

Snape gave his son a quirk of a smile, a light lifting at the corner of his mouth. "You approve, then, do you?"

Harry nodded and blew his breath across his cider. "So, did you and my mum really come here as kids? Mrs. Doran seemed to know you."

"Yes. For a few years your grandfather, Gus, would drive Lily and I out here when we were children. I am pleased to see that the old farm is still thriving," noted Snape as he took in a moment to draw in the ever present aroma of pine that so strongly reminded him of his childhood.

"Did you celebrate Christmas with your parents?" Harry asked carefully, his bright green eyes watching his father with intense scrutiny.

Snape merely shook his head. Then, after a sip of the cider, he added, "I really did not think much of the holiday season until your mother was my friend." His smile was wistful, as he finished, "I believe that Christmas was one of Lily's favourite holidays."



Harry warmed at that sentiment and grinned down at his cider, before lifting his gaze, "I think it's mine, too, Dad."

Snape gazed upon his son who was still looking at him with those bright green eyes that were so like Lily's. Only, in Harry's eyes there was a sparkle of contentment, and a warmth of love that was just for him. Snape sipped his cider again, but he knew the warmth that he felt around his heart wasn't from the drink.

Tuesday, December 24, 1991

Harry tugged at the starched collar of his dress robes as he sat upon a green and cream striped satin upholstered chair of white pine in the Malfoy family wing parlor. Beside him, also tugging at his collar, but with a bit more subtlety, was Draco.

"Where's Hermione?" asked Harry, his voice hushed in the large room that was as big as the main room in the cottage.

"Mother's getting her ready," said Draco. "We don't get to see her until the Naming Ceremony."

"Then where'd my dad go with your dad?" Harry let out a small huff of annoyance. It felt like they had been waiting forever.

Draco considered the question, then replied, "I think your dad is going to take Abraxas' place."

That answered nothing and Harry scowled at his friend. Draco ignored Harry's petulance and moved over to the very large Malfoy tree. The top, tipped with a swirling representation of the goddess Circe sparkled in rainbow colours. Beneath her, the tree's branches were tipped in silver, and it was meticulously decorated with glass-blown ornaments of hippogriffs, dragons, other fantastical creatures, and round balls that were painted with various moving scenes of old world villages.

Harry followed Draco to study the tree. He thought it was pretty, and sparkly, but the tree he and his dad decorated was lots more beautiful.

"Me an' dad cut down our own tree last night," spoke Harry in remembrance. "We also got to drink cider at the tree farm, and then

we took the tree home and decorated it just like mum and dad used to decorate theirs when they were kids."

"How was that?" asked Draco, genuinely curious.

"We made these long strings of popcorn, and cranberries, and some dried oranges that smelled real nice, and put them on the tree." Harry pantomimed with his hands the stringing of the garlands. "Since we didn't have any fairy lights, dad used his wand and touched it to various ends of the branches and they sparkled. It was soooo wicked!"

"Papa doesn't let the house elves touch the tree, or the ornaments, or even the lights," said Draco as he told Harry about their tree decorating. "We have to put on the lights, first, and I finally got to do that, this year." He touched a string of the fluttering fairy lights proudly. "Mother and Hermione put up most of the ornaments, but I have my own ornaments that papa and mother have gotten me each year since I was born." He pointed to a silvery white, blown glass ornament of a winged Pegasus. Very carefully he touched one of the wings. "Mother gave me this one when I was six. I almost broke it." Draco shuddered just a little bit at the memory and Harry could tell that his best friend really loved his ornaments.

"Will Hermione get her own ornaments?" Harry inquired.

"I s'pose," Draco said off-handedly. Harry eyed Draco, and meant to ask what that meant.

Lucius entered the parlor dressed in a finely tailored suit. The jacket was a dark crimson jacket with long tails with a waist that hugged the tall, slim man's waist. The fitted trousers were of soft grey, fine spun wool, and his shirt was a pristine white silk with cuffs of lace that spilled from the sleeves of the jacket.

"Gentlemen," his voice broke the silence. "Come along."

"Where's my dad, Mr. Malfoy?" asked Harry as he followed Draco.

"You'll see him in a moment, Harry."

Lucius led the two boys down a short hallway and down a narrow set of stairs. They went down another hallway that was bare of

portraits, or any sort of adornments. Harry didn't think that was an area often used by the Malfoys.

Tapping his cane on door they came to, it shimmered and morphed from a plain, white door, into a heavy door of great age that had been stained by many centuries. It silently swung open and Harry jerked to a stop as he saw that dark cavern ahead of them.

"Papa," Draco spoke softly. He had felt his friend jerk to a stop and he glanced worriedly at the boy's stricken look.

Lucius quickly dropped to one knee in front of the young boy, putting his cane down on the floor. Very gently he cupped Harry's chin in his fingers as he carefully forced the boy's gaze to his silvery grey eyes.

"Harry? What's wrong?" he asked quietly as Draco lifted one of Harry's limp hands into his own.

Harry's tongue ran over his upper lip and he drew in a shuddering breath. "It's dark." The boy's head shook rapidly. "I don' wanna go in there." He tried to step back a step, but Draco was holding onto his hand still.

Lucius turned slightly, picked up his cane and waved it at the entrance. Immediately torches lit up drowning the rather cavernous entrance in yellow-gold light. He then returned his attention to the boy whose breathing had begun to even out when the torches lit up.

"There's nothing to be afraid of, my boy," Lucius drew the backs of his fingers on his right hand down Harry's cheek. "Your father is down there, as are Narcissa and Hermione."

Harry finally focused his gaze on Lucius. "My dad? He's downstairs?"

"He is." Lucius rose to his feet, and then held a hand out to Snape's son. For a moment Harry hesitated, but then he took the proffered hand and walked down the long set of spiral steps and into a round chamber.

The chamber was all of white marble from the walls, to the seven columns that supported the ceiling above, to the walls, and to the floor. Torchieres, three on each column, lit the chamber with

flickering flames. Narcissa, in a gown of lavender silk and lace, stood beside Hermione who was wearing a beautiful gown of pale, blue velvet. She did not look up at Draco, Harry, or Lucius.

Snape was at the center of the chamber on a modestly raised, round area of the floor. When Harry saw him, he raised his voice, and spoke, "Daddy?" Harry's voice echoed with a mild waver, and Snape, who was reading an old scroll, turned sharply at the worry in his son's voice. Snape glanced sharply at Lucius, and then to Harry's great consternation, and confusion, his father turned back to the scroll. He lurched forward, but found he was stopped by Draco's father still holding onto his hand, firmly.

Lucius knew he had to defuse the situation, and quickly, or the Naming Ceremony would not be done this evening. With a squawk of surprised protest from Harry, he hoisted the child up into his arms, holding him despite his attempts to squirm away.

"Stop this right now, young man!" Lucius scolded with a low voice that hissed slightly.

Harry, who hadn't had someone else speak to him as his father did, froze suddenly, and eyed the wizard that held him warily.

"You saw your father, and you know that there is nothing here to hurt you, Harry." His scolding softened. "Your father has graciously consented to... represent... the Malfoy ancestors and to officiate the ceremony." Harry turned his head away to look towards his father, who seemed to be solely concentrating on the scroll he held. Lucius touched a finger to the boy's chin and drew his gaze back to his own. "Such a role means that Severus must not be disturbed until the ceremony is ended."

"What's going to happen?" asked Harry worriedly. This was all so strange to him. Weird, even. An unwelcome voice whispered in his mind, 'Freak!' that sounded very much like his Aunt Petunia.

In a soft whisper that only Harry could hear, Lucius explained what Snape was going to do. After several minutes of the explanation, Lucius felt Harry's body relax and so he let him back down.

"It's okay, Harry," smiled Draco at his friend. Harry smiled back wanly.

Snape's head rose from the studying of the scroll. He glanced back at Lucius; a signal between the two wizards. Lucius led the boys towards the center of the chamber. He directed Draco to beside his mother, then directed Harry to stand on Hermione's left side, but between Snape and the Malfoys. Lucius then went to stand next to Hermione, on her left.

Harry felt a little like the odd wizard out until his father caught his eye. It was a brief glance, but there was enough in the Dark Man's obsidian gaze to let him know he was doing well, and that Snape was pleased with him.

With a sudden flourish, Snape vanished the scroll, and raised his arms. He spoke quietly, but his voice surrounded everyone in the chamber. "I call upon the Honored Ones to bless this family and to accept within their number, this good child!"

The chamber rumbled, gently. Harry's eyes were glued to his father who began to glow with an unearthly, deep blue light. He turned his head to look at the Malfoys. Hermione, who had appeared very calm a few minutes ago, looked a bit nervous. Draco, Narcissa, and Lucius were all smiling, though.

"Hermione Jean Granger," Snape intoned, his voice sounding like his dark, silken tones, but it echoed with the cadence of other voices. Hermione stepped forward half a step. "Do you wish to join the Malfoy family, with all the blessings such a relationship will entail?"

Hermione's voice came out shyly, but politely, "Yes, please."

Snape's raised arms swooped down until they were stretched out in front of him. Hermione knelt, then, so that the wizard's hands were over her head. A mist of blue light drifted over the small witch.

Snape's multiple layered voice then called, "Lucius Malfoy, patriarch and lord of Malfoy, do you accept this good child as your daughter?"

Lucius stepped forward so that he was now beside the kneeling girl. "I accept this good child as the daughter of my heart." The older wizard then knelt upon both knees beside Hermione and the blue mist drifted over him.

Snape then addressed Narcissa. "Narcissa Malfoy, matriarch and lady of Malfoy, do you accept this good child as your daughter?"

Narcissa glided forward and gave a small, respectful curtsy to the Malfoy ancestors. She then replied, "I do gladly accept this good child as the daughter of my heart." It was Narcissa's turn to kneel beside Hermione. The blue mist then embraced her, as well.

Lastly, Snape and the Honored Ones addressed the youngest member of the Malfoy family, "Draco Malfoy, son of Lord and Lady Malfoy, do you accept this good child as your sister?"

Draco stepped too far forward, and had to take two steps back so he was standing next to his mother. He then bowed his head once respectively. "I will accept Her... I mean... this good child as the sister my heart." Draco dropped to his knees, and winced as he hit the marble floor before a Cushioning Charm could catch him. Narcissa caught him before he collapsed sideways, cast the Cushioning Charm, and then nudged her son to straighten his back. When he was settled, the blue mist floated down, and around him.

"Good child, you are accepted as daughter and sister into this family, and you shall receive the blessings of your ancestors once you tell us your name."

Hermione, whose head had been bowed, raised it so that she was looking into Snape's dark gaze. She swallowed once, then spoke, "I have chosen to honor my mother in being named after a flower. I have chosen to honor my father's French heritage in choosing the flower that is their national flower, and in taking the Malfoy name." She bowed her head slightly, then raised it. "M-My name is Hermione Iris Malfoy."

The blue mist swirled around the Malfoy family and Harry watched, his mouth in an 'O' of awe as it swirled up to the ceiling and vanished so that only his father still had that odd, blue glow.

Snape spoke one last time as his arms lowered to his sides, "Blessings, good daughter. Welcome, Hermione Iris Malfoy." Narcissa and Draco stood, and Lucius stood, giving Hermione a hand up.

The blue glow abruptly faded from around Snape and his shoulders slumped, the only sign of how wearying it had been for him to channel the Malfoy ancestors. Although he barely felt like moving, he forced himself off of the dais and looked at his son. Harry smiled and knew that whatever had kept his father from him was gone. He ran over and threw his arms around his Dark Man's waist, and squeezed in relief.

"That was wicked, but weird, Dad," he exclaimed.

A/N: First, a very huge apology for how long this took. Now, here is why: I am 48 years old and my eyesight has never been great, but with glasses, I've been able to do what I wanted. About a year ago Age-Related Near-Sightedness cropped up. The past two months it has just gotten worse, to the point that I am unable to spend the hours (about 12-16 hours a day) I have been spending writing. I probably need new prescription reading glasses, but since I am nearly house-bound, and I do not drive, and we currently, STILL, have 16 inches of snow outside, I cannot get to the eye doctor. I have an appointment in March, but until then, I have to really cut down on my writing time, or not write at all. Frankly, I am not about to stop writing. That would be a death sentence. So, my question to you my dear readers, if you're still with me, would you like smaller chapters that have a chance of appearing with greater frequency than longer chapters that might take me a month+ to write? Or, are you willing to wait a month for the long chapters? Let me know what you wish for.

Now, a bow to Badbonita for the contribution of Hermione's middle name. As she wrote: "As for a middle name for Hermione, I'm going to make the offer of 'Iris'. Why, it follows the one of the Black naming traditions of flower names and it's the national flower of France which nods to the Malfoy's heritage." I had a lot of great suggestions, but this one I felt was really the most perfect. Thank you, Badbonita!

Lastly, if anyone wishes to question, annoy, or interact with Professor Snape, he has his own Tumblr blog at <http://professor-snape.tumblr.com> / where you may submit questions and he will answer. You can ask anonymously, so you don't need an account. If you do ask anonymously, please leave your FF name, so I (he) knows who you are. There is also to be found great fanart, quotes from the movies and books, fanfic recs, and photos of Alan Rickman as our beloved Potions Master.

December 24th, 1991

The Winter Ball at Malfoy Manor was considered one of the biggest, most looked forward to events in the wizarding world. Wizards and witches all over the world anticipated receiving the invitations that were on the finest produced onionskin that was elegantly decorated with edges of burnt silver, and written with gold ink, that was real gold.

However, only two hundred of the invitations were ever sent.

The magnificent ballroom, in the older part of Malfoy Manor, glittered itself, and glittered from the guests. A full orchestra of witches and wizards, provided the music. Opposite the orchestra pit was a sumptuous buffet for the guests that also included a beautiful ice sculpture of Narcissa's favourite goddess, Circe. Dancing couples occupied the middle of the ballroom, while other guests either sat upon velvet covered chairs, or lounges, or mingled with other guests to chat, and to enjoy the many wines and champagnes that were also provided.

Both Hermione and Harry, standing with their parents at the top of the grand staircase, felt overwhelmed by the scene below them. Harry was already gripping his father's hand tightly, when Hermione's hand slipped into his other one. Draco, who had not been old enough to attend the Winter Ball, stood proudly beside his father. Narcissa stood on her son's other side with Hermione next to her.

As the guests realised that their host and hostess had arrived, the orchestra stopped playing, and the gentle sussuration of discourse became hushed. All eyes turned to the top of the staircase and Harry took one step back, and bumped against his father's legs. Snape let go of his son's hand, and placed his hands upon Harry's shoulders, making his son feel a bit more secure.

Lucius stepped forward and held out his arms in welcome. "Ladies and gentlemen, welcome to the Winter Ball." A smattering of polite applause greeted the Malfoys. Lucius nodded in acquiescence. "This year, all of my family are old enough to attend the Ball, and I would like to present them to you." Lucius held out a hand towards Draco, who was nudged a step forward by his mother. "My son, and heir, Draco."



Draco smiled, a charming smile nearly the mirror of his father's own, public smile. He then bowed to the applause and moved to his father's right side.

"I now wish to introduce our dear daughter," Hermione stepped nervously forward. "Hermione Iris Malfoy."

As she had been instructed earlier, Hermione curtseyed to more applause. Lucius then took his wife by the hand, and led his family down the grand staircase. Snape, Harry, Draco, and Hermione followed behind.

Harry, Draco, and Hermione were fortunate to find other children, most attendees of Hogwarts, to busy themselves with. The Winter Ball itself was fascinating, but once Lucius and Narcissa had introduced their children to certain people, they were allowed to go off with their counterparts to enjoy a smaller, more raucous party.

Snape, for once, found himself wishing her were a first year so that he could escape, not the ball, but Narcissa, with Harry and the others. He waited, awkwardly, near the large, ornate fireplace, a brandy in one hand.

Ordered by both the adult Malfoys that he dare not wear all black, the Potions Master made a concession in wearing formal robes of forest green over a very dark, grey suit. The suit coat was a fitted Victorian frock coat with the high collar he preferred. The only ornamentation was a pocket watch with a gold fob that stretched from pocket to pocket, and dangled across his slim abdomen. He was oblivious to the looks of interest he was getting from many of the single witches in the crowd.

After she had made her social rounds, which hadn't taken as long as Snape had hoped, Narcissa woman had cornered him. She had then taken a gilded Dancing Card from a hidden pocket in the skirts of her gown, slipped her arm over his elbow, and moved closer to show him names neatly quilled onto the card.

"Your first dance of the evening is Alexandra Wimpoolle," exclaimed Narcissa warming up to her favourite subject. She nodded towards a woman whose dark brown hair had been done up rather too high on her head. Snape scowled. Narcissa smiled. "Well, her fashion is a

bit out of date, but Alexandra is quite intelligent." Snape added a sneer to his scowl.

"You'll adore her!" admonished Narcissa with a condescending smile that threatened to ignore Snape's displeasure all evening. "Next will be Tianna del Suego, the daughter of the Spanish ambassador. Narcissa subtly pointed out a dark-eyed, dark-haired beauty. For a moment Snape was a tiny bit caught by the young lady's beauty, but then she turned, and gave him a very disapproving glance. Narcissa caught the insulting look, and with a wave of her hand, Tianna's name was gone. "Well, that means..."

Snape was quickly, and as politely as possible, extricating his arm from Narcissa's. The beautiful, blonde witch, looked up at Snape. "Severus, what are you...? Where are you going?"

Snape paused, and bowed his head stiffly to Lucius' wife. "I know I should have said something earlier, Narcissa, but I invited... a friend. Would you make my apologies to all of those young ladies?"

"I... well..." Narcissa huffed and scowled daintily. "Really, Severus..." It was useless to say anything else since the dark man was cutting a smooth swath through minglers, and dancers, towards the huge, arched entrance to the ballroom. Looking away from the departing wizard, Narcissa's interested gaze went to the witch standing, shyly, within the entrance.

Narcissa assessed the witch who was rather lovely despite the white strands that gave her golden blonde hair a silvered touch. The witch, who seemed somehow familiar wore a soft grey kirtle of velvet over a forest green chemise of silk that peeked out from split panels on the front, back, and sides of the kirtle. The bodice, tightly laced up the front, was heavily embroidered using peacock thread of silk in a design of Celtic knots. Although a lovely gown, it was a common one. Still, Narcissa had to admit that the gown suited the witch. However, the witch wore her hair, of white and gold, in a cascade of gentle waves to her waist with no sort of pins, or style, other than it had probably been brushed to its glossy sheen. Narcissa bowed to the more restrained, witchly fashion, that called for stylish restraint to a woman's long hair, and she could not help the delicate sniff at the witch's apparent immodesty.

As the lovely woman's eyes caught Snape's gaze, Narcissa suddenly realised who the beauty was, and she was speechless. Another voice behind her, spoke instead.

"I would never have guessed that beneath those starched medical robes, and tight bun there existed a flower waiting to bloom," commented Lucius quietly in his wife's ear.

"Madame Pomfrey!" Narcissa gasped softly in wonder.

Both husband and wife watched as Severus Snape escorted Poppy Pomfrey from her solitude beneath the arch, and proceeded to lead her onto the dance floor.

Poppy Pomfrey had rarely gone to any sort of a dance, much less the Winter Ball at Malfoy Manor. Her patients had always come first, and although Hogwarts was lacking in patients over the holidays, she often volunteered at St. Mungo's.

Needless to say, it had been a simple thing to decline the Potions Master's invitation, but Snape was persistent. Especially since he was begging the favour of a friend to thwart the match-making machinations of Narcissa Malfoy.

Just before the holidays, Snape had made one, last, humble entreaty to Poppy's sense of helping others. Poppy had simply smiled, patted his arm, and told him with her own sort of gentle smirk, that she would help him.

Snape had been quietly anticipating the shock of his 'date' all that evening at the Winter Ball. He had not expected to receive his own shock when he'd finally pushed through all the guests to behold his friend.

Like nearly everyone, Snape had only ever seen Poppy in her medi-witch's uniform. Starched blue gown of a simple cut, and an apron of purest white; both infused with spells that dealt with the grosser aspects of an Infirmary visited by sick children.

It literally took his breath away when he beheld a very different looking, and quite beautiful woman standing beneath the great entrance arch.

Poppy's generally severe, and business-like looks tended to make her appear older than she was. Few realised that Poppy had begun her duties at Hogwarts Infirmary as an apprentice the very same year that Snape had arrived as a first year student. She was just eighteen, and only a year away from having been a seventh year at Hogwarts.

At the time she had glamoured a few strands of grey and white into her hair so she would be taken more seriously. As the years passed, though, the grey was non-existent, but the white was there to stay and had an annoying habit of increasing a bit each year. Poppy blamed the Marauders and Severus for most of the white hair.

Poppy shifted self-consciously under the wizard's dark, and frankly appraising gaze. She brushed at a strand of hair that was tickling her cheek, and she blushed as Snape smiled at the gesture.

"Severus!" she admonished under her breath. "Do me the favour of removing me from this display, would you?"

Snape nodded, and held out his arm. "I was simply admiring what every other wizard was admiring, Poppy," he replied with a smirk and escorted her onto the dance floor.

Realising where they were headed, Poppy began to protest, "Severus! I told you I can't dance! Please, I don't... whoo!" Before the medi-witch could finish her protest, Snape had expertly whirled her onto the dance floor, taking her breath away with the steps of the sprightly waltz.

After another dance, and another attempt at getting away, Snape pulled Poppy close to his chest, and spoke softly into her ear, "Methinks the witch doth protest too much. You dance quite well, Poppy."

Poppy pushed Snape away to a more respectable distance as they continued to dance. "If you continue with those absurd compliments, Severus, my blood pressure is going to send me into a faint."

"Ah, a fit of the vapours," teased Snape. He received a thump of her hand to his chest, and he twirled her again, effortlessly, through the dancers.

Over on the other side of the ballroom where she could best watch her guests, Narcissa was glowering; rather prettily thought her husband. The aristocratic witch was watching Snape and Madame Pomfrey like a hawk.

"... but Madame Pomfrey?" she declared, for perhaps the tenth time.

Lucius leaned towards his wife. "You have yet to tell me what, if any, your objection is to the medi-witch, my dear."

Narcissa glared at her husband quickly with a look that scolded him, as if he should know. "I don't know anything about where she comes from!"

Lucius scowled condescendingly, "And why would her ancestry matter, Narcissa?"

She crossed her arms lightly over her chest, "Well, I suppose it shouldn't, but don't you want Severus to marry the right sort of woman?"

Lucius laughed. "My dear! Have you got them married already?" Using his thumb, he gently smoothed his wife's frowning brow, and kissed her temple. "Isn't it possible that Madame Pomfrey is merely Severus' friend?"

"A man never has a woman as 'just a friend', Lucius," chided Narcissa. She watched the couple, catching them just as Poppy laughed brightly at something Severus must have said to her. The medi-witch's cheeks were flushed with the high colour of the evening, and, Narcissa expected, the attention of the wizard holding her rather a bit, too close for 'just friends'.

Lucius drew his wife up from the chair she was sitting upon, and towards the dancers. "Come, wife," he commanded, though the smile took away the mock sternness. "Severus Snape's love life, or lack thereof, is none of our business, as I have tried to say so before. Dance with me!" Narcissa couldn't reply since she was swept out amongst the dancers, and very soon her thoughts were all on her husband.

At eleven of the clock, the Winter Ball proceeded on its own without the Malfoy family. The Malfoys, with Snape and Harry in attendance

(Madame Pomfrey had vanished, almost like Cinderella, at nine of the clock), retired to the family wing of the manor so they could proceed with their Christmas.

Their celebration was a small one in the parlor with hot chocolate for the children, and hot rum toddies for the adults as they exchanged gifts.

Snape had found a century old bottle of brandy in one of the Prince vaults that he gave to both Lucius and Narcissa. He then gave to Narcissa an old libretto of an opera written by a long deceased member of the Prince family. To Lucius he gave the older wizard a book on Rune Magic and Spirit Magic. It was a very old book, that Snape had copied for himself, and then spent a painstaking month restoring since it was the worse for wear in places.

Draco received from his professor, a set of stories by a Muggle author, Charles Dickens. Draco was immediately fascinated by the volume, and was settled by the large tree, reading the eye-catching story titled, A Christmas Carol. To Hermione, in acknowledgment of her new family, he presented her with a large tome that detailed the history of the Malfoy family. Lucius had helped with putting together that book for his daughter.

Gifts were exchanged amongst the children, until Lucius stood up amongst the small group. His eyes regarded Harry solemnly. "Harry, we have a gift for you, but I would like for you to consider it as a long-awaited gift from your parents."

Harry stiffened. His parents? He nodded, but a slight nudge from his father had him saying, "Yes, Mr. Malfoy? My parents? What is it?"

At a Summons from Narcissa, a large, trunk-sized box wrapped in silver and gold and topped by two red ribbons floated into the parlor. It then plunked itself down on the floor, where Harry sat in front of his father's legs, in front of Harry.

For a long minute, Harry just stared at the gift. He then reached over, took off the ribbons, and tore the silver and gold paper. Under the paper was a trunk, a school trunk, that had seen better days. It was sturdy, though, made of good wood, painted lavender, and trimmed with silver tarnished corners, and edges, and it had a large lock at the front. Beneath the lock, in curvy script, was the name, Lily.

Snape leaned over to touch the trunk. "That belonged to your mother," he whispered to his son, marveling at what he was seeing. "I was with her when she chose it. I thought lavender was a very girly colour, even for a girl's trunk."

Harry giggled and looked up at his father. "What do you think's in it, Dad?"

"I have no idea, son. Why do you not open it and find out." Harry did so, unaware that his two friends had crept closer out of curiosity. Lucius had sat back down beside Narcissa, with a self-satisfied smile on his face.

Harry lifted the lock and pushed the decently heavy lid up until it stood on its own. Inside, the trunk was packed, and he began taking things out. He found a photograph album that he stopped to look through, but he didn't see any photos of his father. Just two little kids doing lots of stuff. Harry paused at one of the photos of a boy and girl chasing each other on a beach somewhere.

"Is that my mum?" Harry asked pointing at the laughing girl.

Snape felt a sharp pain in his chest as he nodded. "It is. And... er... the boy is me. This is a photograph album Lea, your grandmother, made after I gave her a wizarding camera.

"Look, Harry!" crowed Hermione. "Here's another one!"

Harry scowled at Hermione for having gone into his trunk. He snatched the album from Hermione who backed away slightly. "Sorry," she whispered.

"Don't be nosy!" hissed Draco. The tow-headed boy looked up just in time to receive a glare from his father. Narcissa had simply pulled Hermione gently back to sit against her legs.

The other album was the wedding album of James and Lily's wedding. Snape ignored it, and urged his son on to continuing to unpack the trunk. Harry attacked the trunk with vigor, and soon had the contents all around him. Other than a brush and comb set of copper, and a set of seventh year robes, everything belonged to Lily. There was her jewelry box that contained a wealth of jewelry, a set

of Lily's first year school robes, some of her school books, a journal of her school days, an older Muggle photo album of Lily and her family. The most startling treasure, though, consisted of a photo album Lily had made of Harry and James and Lily, Harry's christening gown that was worn to the christening Lily's parents had for Harry, his Naming Ceremony gown that James' parents had for their grandson, and a gift never opened.

The gift had sat beneath everything, and nearly hidden by the christening gown.

Harry sat, a bit uneasily, leaning against his father's legs with the gift in his lap. He was eying it warily.

"Go on, Harry," urged Draco. "Open it."

Harry took a deep breath, one that he did not know was mirrored by Snape behind him, and carefully removed the paper. There was a plain box inside and he lifted the lid off of it to reveal a beautiful black silk and velvet rabbit. Snape gasped at the sight of the gift as Harry pulled out a card. He read the familiar, spiky handwriting, "For Harry. In remembrance of a friendship, Severus." The boy turned sharply to look up at his father. "It's from you, Dad! How come I never got it?"

Snape sighed heavily at the long, distant memory. "I sent the gift, I believe, a month, possibly more, after your first year birthday. With your parents moved to Godric's Hollow, in the confusion I surmise, it is possible that Lily overlooked it." Snape really did not have an answer, and did not wish to think that Lily had simply decided not to give the rabbit, a poor olive branch, in Snape's opinion, to the baby Harry.

Harry stood up, hugging the rabbit fiercely to his chest. He gave his father a one-armed hug and whispered into Snape's ear, "Thank you... for everything, Daddy."

Snape hugged his son back, then turned him around to face the Malfoys. "Do not forget who else deserves your gratitude, son."

Harry smiled shyly at the adult Malfoys. "Thanks so much, Mr. and Mrs. Malfoy. This is all really, really great!"



Midnight came and found Narcissa and Hermione on a plush lounge sleeping lightly over the libretto. Draco was deep asleep, and leaning against his father. Harry had climbed up into Snape's lap not long ago, and was snoozing with soft snores, against his father's chest.

Lucius spoke softly as his hand caressed his son's hair, "The trunk was the only thing that my contacts were able to find, Severus. I was able to discover that everything that the Potters had owned, that wasn't magical, was auctioned off into the Muggle world. An elderly man had purchased a large lot of furniture, that he sold off here and there, but he kept the trunk because of the 'odd pictures' in the one album." Lucius smirked. "He wasn't about to part with it, but my contact can be a very persuasive gentleman and he acquired the trunk and all that was in it."

Snape nodded. He could easily imagine what sort of persuasion might have been used against a Muggle. "Can you tell me of the Potter Library? What of Jameson Potter's collection of magical artefacts? Both of those were rather impressive."

Lucius shook his head, and grimaced as he replied, "The artefacts... I have no answer for those, but, the Potter Library has been right under your nose, Severus."

Snape frowned, and paused. Then, he understood. "Hogwarts? That old, conniving coot! The entire Potter Library is now part of Hogwarts Library?"

Lucius nodded and raised a silencing finger to his lips as he glanced pointedly at both sleeping boys. "Now is not the time to think of such things, Severus."

Snape carefully rose to his feet, shifting his son so he was holding him more securely. Harry let out a yawn, and some sort of garbled sleep speech. Snape automatically patted his child's back as he walked them over to the Floo.

Lucius used his wand to levitate his son so he could slip out from under the boy. He then tucked a pillow under Draco's head before lowering him back to the sofa. The patrician then walked to stand beside Snape and Harry. Lucius stretched out his hand and gently

touched Harry's warm cheek. "May Father Christmas bless you both, my friend."

Snape gave the older wizard a formal bow, as much as he was able with an armful of child. "And may his blessing be to your family, as well, Lucius" Snape flung the Floo powder into the orange flame. At his call for the cottage, the flames whooshed into green, and he stepped in and vanished.

December 24th, 1991 – very late at night

Snape moved around the main room of the cottage while his son slept the deep sleep all children slept on the night before Christmas.

The tree blinked with the lights Snape had conjured on the ends of the branches, but he replaced that temporary magic with two strings of faery lights. To the rest of the room he waved his wand. Garland of ivy and holly berries adorned the windows, the door, and the mantle over the large fireplace. To the greenery on the mantle Snape added tapered, white candles with small flames that he shielded from igniting anything other than the candles.

The Potions Master then went over to the heavy table that acted as both a table of study, and a table for meals. He Summoned a series of packages from his bedroom that were all wrapped in a variety of coloured papers, and foils. Each of the boxes held a wonderful array of sweets, cheeses, candied fruits, and nuts that were gifts from nearly all the Hogwarts staff, and also from Molly Weasley. Snape stacked the boxes so that they formed a small, pyramidal tree of presents. The last thing that he did was to Summon wrapped gifts from his bedroom and placed them under the tree.

He had already decided that the "anonymous" gift from the Headmaster would not be placed on the table, but would go into a spell-protected box for storage. To his disgust he had found in the package the musty Cloak of Invisibility that had belonged to James Potter the goblins at Gringotts had warned him existed. Once Snape had discovered the cloak, he understood, all too well how the teenaged miscreant had managed a great deal of his sneakiness.

Shoving aside his thoughts of that so-called gift, he checked over the stack of presents from the other staff. Mostly practical things for

school, Snape had indulged his son with a few things a child would enjoy.

After just barely suppressing a yawn, Snape headed into his bedroom, threw off his coat, his shoes, and fell into bed.

Wednesday, December 25th, 1991

Harry woke up very early in the quiet cottage. So early that as he looked out the window the sun was just bashfully touching the horizon. Crawling out of his bed caused the velvet and silk rabbit to emerge from his tangled blankets. Smiling, Harry grabbed the rabbit and squeezed it in his arms. He knew he was too old for plushy animals, but he had never had one to cuddle with as a baby. It was his, though, and it was Christmas. If he wanted to cuddle a cute rabbit that his father had given him (several years late), then he would do so. With the rabbit now firmly in one arm, he scooted down to the end of his bed, and stared down at the trunk that had belonged to his mother. The lavender was a bit too bright, and he noticed there were some little hearts etched into the top. He smiled, thinking of his mother as a little firstie at Hogwarts. Probably a little bit scared, like he had been, and in awe, too. Everything at Hogwarts was so big, so wonderful... magical.

Clambering off his bed he hopped over the trunk and sat down in front of it to open its heavy lid. Just like a child at Christmas, he stared down at all the contents that had been neatly re-packed. He stretched his hand into the trunk and ran his fingers over everything. His fingers rested on one of his mother's school books. Taking one out, he glanced at the title and saw that it was a first year Potions book. Eagerly he opened the book and marveled at all the notes written in the margin. Right away he picked out two different hand writings; one was curvy, and loopy, and in various colours of ink, the other was spiky, precise, and either in green, or red. He recognised his father's hand writing, and surmised that the other, girly hand, was that of his mother's.

A good portion of the notes were just Potions related stuff. Then, he found that there were other notes that were more personal.

'Slughorn's boring,' his father Severus had written in red ink on page 27.

'He's fat, and he smells funny,' Lily had written back in blue ink. Harry giggled.

On page 54 was a longer exchange that began with Severus writing, 'That stupid Potter boy is looking at you again.'

'What a toerag!' Lily had written and underlined the last word three times. Harry smirked.

'You don't like him?' Severus had asked.

'Course not, silly Sev. You're my best friend.'

Harry closed the book and looked down into the trunk for some older textbooks. He found a seventh year charms book and opened it. Just like in first year, there were more notes, and exchanges, but the hand writing accompanying his mother's was different. Always in brown ink, this hand reminded Harry of marching soldiers. It was precise, but every once in awhile, a few letters got lazy.

On page 342 he read, 'Are you coming to Hogsmeade with me this weekend, Lily?'

'Of course I am, James. Pay attention!'

A few more pages and Harry read similar exchanges. Obviously his father James, didn't like paying attention in class because Lily kept chiding him for that.

Closing the textbook, he took out the wedding album. He had a sudden yearning to see his real father's face, although he had seen the ghostly James Potter at his adoption ritual. Slowly, Harry went through the album. None of the photos moved, so it had probably been a Muggle that took the photos. Harry stopped at one photo, of the wedding party, and stared at it.

James Potter had a wide smile on his face, although it was slightly lopsided, but not terribly so. It kind of gave his father a rakish look, instead of a goofy one. His hair was messy, and Harry frowned at that.

Since being blood adopted by Snape, one small change had come in the smoothness of his hair. His father of now also let him grow his hair long, just to his shoulders, and he liked the way his hair fell now.

Aunt Petunia had hated Harry's hair. If she wasn't complaining about it, threatening to hack it all off, then she was combing it so harshly that sometimes the boy felt like he was being scalped. Harry himself had tried so many times to make his hair nicer, but nothing he did helped. Looking in the mirror, or a reflective surface, he had always felt... undone. It was almost like he had just forgotten to wash himself. As a consequence, Harry greatly disliked this feature, and hoped that maybe another part of him looked like James.

Touching his face, he then looked down at his hands. Harry knew he had his mother's green eyes, and his father Severus often told him his personality was like Lily's. He had also been told by some of the older students that his flying was as good as James. Harry frowned, but what else about him was like James?

His fingers lightly skimmed over the photo of his parents, then lingered on his father James.

Snape had awakened at seven-thirty in the morning. For a brief moment he listened, but heard nothing. Puzzled that he had not been awakened by a Christmas morning excited child, he rose from his bed, completed his morning ablutions, and put on his slippers, and a long, dark green velvet dressing gown. Leaving his room he stepped across to Harry's room, opened the door, and glanced in to see his son surrounded by all the contents of his mother's school trunk.

Harry smiled up at his father and was about to jump up and greet him, but Snape motioned him to stay put as he stepped carefully over everything and seated himself on the edge of his son's bed.

"Dad, there's so much here. You and mum used to write in her books. Some of it was neat, but then there was a lot that was funny. My father did that later, too." For a brief moment Harry's features were worried, and Snape shuddered inwardly to think what Potter must have written about him to Lily in her books. Snape had explained a little about their dislike in school to Harry, but he had not gone into detail. Since the adoption ritual when the ghost of James Potter had nodded in approval to him, he had been trying to put that

old hurt away for good. His growing... friendship... with Remus Lupin was helping in that regard. Still, the old hurts were hard to get rid of, and sometimes they blossomed, sharply, like a razor in his soul.

Lily's school trunk had awakened so many memories. Closing his eyes, just briefly, he settled on one, small memory that often had him smiling back when they had been students.

That trunk. Lily's trunk. Pinkish-lavender. Severus and Lily had been taken by Lea Evans to Diagon Alley for proper wizarding trunks. Severus could afford only a second hand one, but it was a handsome one that was still quite sturdy. Lily, though, had fallen in love with that trunk and its nausea inducing colour. Severus had tried, and so had Lea, to interest Lily in a trunk of ANY other colour but that one! Lily was stubborn, though. It was beautiful, and that was that.

"Dad?" Harry interrupted his father's thoughts as he held up the jewelry box. "What am I going to do with this?"

Snape took the box out of his son's hands and examined the pieces. They were lovely, but, he noted, none of the pieces were jewelry that Lea had given to her daughter. The Potions Master suspected that Petunia probably had her mother's jewelry. The brooches, rings, necklaces, and bracelets were almost all goblin-made. That meant they had more than likely come from the Potter side of the family, and were possibly gifts from James to Lily.

Snape's fingers carefully withdrew what at first appearance resembled an overly large brooch. It was immediately evident that the piece was not a brooch, but the Potter family crest. Something handed down from father to son.

The crest was almost all gold, but with rich, enameled highlights of colour. It was in the shape of two gryphons flanking a sun. The eye of one gryphon was a ruby, the eye of the other gryphon was an emerald.

"This is what you should keep, Harry," said Snape as he handed the crest to his son.

Harry liked the look of the piece of jewelry. It was nice, and big, and heavy. "What is it, Dad?"

"The Potter crest. This is something, that had Pot... James been able to, he would have given to you on your 17th birthday." Harry took the Potter crest from his father and held it gently in both hands. Snape thought his son appeared mesmerised by the crest.

With his eyes still upon the medallion in his hands, Harry quietly asked, "Dad? Do I look anything at all like my... uhm... James?"

Snape let out a silent sigh. Harry was still awkward at mentioning James around him, and he needed to fix that. "There is nothing wrong in wishing to resemble your father, Harry. As you know, you already have your mother's eyes."

Harry nodded. "Professor McGonagall told me I fly like James." One of the boy's hands dropped to the wedding album in his lap where Snape could see it was opened to an image of the bride and groom, Lily and James. Harry's fingers ghosted wistfully over his father's grinning face.

Snape left the edge of his son's bed and settled himself on the floor by the child. He tried to ignore a singular disturbing crack from his knee as he bent down to fold himself up into a position he hadn't indulged in since he was Harry's age. Once as comfortable, as was possible for a full grown adult, Snape placed his fingertips under his son's chin, and tipped up his head.

Harry's eyes widened, wondering what his father was up to as Snape appeared to be studying him very carefully. After what seemed like a long time, but was hardly two minutes, Snape spoke to his son's question, "Certainly Lily's eyes, but the bone structure of your face is quite like James'." Snape gave his son a teasing smile as he ran his fingers through the child's soft, nearly straight hair. "From the blood adoption it appears you have inherited my finer hair."

Harry looked down at the photograph of his mother and father. "They're both the same height," he observed. "Was my Jame... my father... was he short?"

Snape glanced down at the wedding portrait and for once he did not settle upon Lily, but scrutinised James. "Well, the Potter men have never been tall. I seem to recall between Sirius Black, Remus Lupin, and James, that he was the shorter of the two. I believe that is why

he was such a good flyer." Snape looked up and considered his son. "James was a good Chaser, but with his skill, he quite likely could have been a passable Seeker."

Harry didn't acknowledge his father's compliment as he sighed heavily. "So I'm always gonna be short."

"Tut, tut, Harry," Snape chided gently. "Your erstwhile relatives treatment affected your growth, but the Nutrition Potions you have been taking have been helping a great deal to reverse the damage. When you have a growth spurt, around the age of thirteen, we shall have a better idea of what your eventual height will be." Again he tipped up his son's head so he could look into those inquisitive, green eyes. "It might also be possible for you to inherit my stature."

Harry grinned. He desperately wanted to be taller. Not like a giant, or anything, but he had always been so small... so vulnerable, and his father was far from the vulnerable sort. Snape wasn't the tallest person, either, but he did have a respectable height, and he also had a presence that, when he wished it, made him rather an imposing force in a crowd of people.

"So, can you be patient until then?" asked Snape of Harry.

"Yeah. I can." Harry slipped his arms around his father's waist and hugged him tightly.

Snape patted his small boy's back and smirked. "I think it is time to see if Father Christmas visited us last night, Harry."

Harry lifted his head in surprise. "Would he come all the way out here?"

"Shall we see?" asked Snape as he rose, a bit too creakily from his position on the floor. Once straightened, he held his hand out to Harry, who took it, and together they went out into the main room of the cottage.

At the sight of all the holly, the ivy, the ornaments, and lights, Harry's mouth dropped open. His eyes widened, and Snape felt his son's fingers tighten around his.



"Dad," Harry whispered, as if afraid to disturb the beauty. "There's presents under the tree!" He then saw the table also stacked with gifts. "Look at that!"

"I see," chuckled Snape. He nudged the boy forward, and watched as Harry, at first, seemed to creep up warily towards the tree. He then fell to his knees before a large, blue foil wrapped box, and let out a gasp as he read the pretty label.

"To Harry, from Father Christmas!" Harry turned a little towards his father. With a nod from Snape, Harry let out a whoop and tore into the gift.

Snape watched, curious at first, by the joy that suffused his blood at the sight. He knew that, technically, Harry was too old for the myth of Father Christmas, and it was likely that Harry himself knew that the old man was merely legend, but Harry had never had presents from the kindly, old gentleman of Christmas in purple velvet robes trimmed in white fur.

A few, token gifts, toys for the most part, were labeled as from Father Christmas. A few more, yet practical gifts, were from Snape. Things such as new robes, an outfit for Summer, socks, and to Harry's embarrassment (because it was a parent's right to embarrass their child even on Christmas) under things. Harry saw those in the box from Madame Malkins and immediately slapped the top back on, and shoved it under the tree.

Within minutes, Harry was surrounded by a half-dozen toys, and books, and clothes, and a wealthy mess of ribbon, coloured, torn paper, and boxes. Snape vanished the mess and then stepped further towards the tree. He then seated himself upon the sofa.

"Come here, Harry," said Snape patting the space beside him. Harry moved away from the gifts and climbed up beside his father, pushing himself under the man's accommodating arm.

For a moment, the two Snapes sat in the peace of Christmas day. Around them fairy lights blinked on and off, a few flew up and down the tree, and the pleasant smell of evergreen, and warm spices permeated the air of the small cottage. Smiles of contentment graced the faces of both father and son as each of them embraced the blessing of the other in their lives.

It was Snape who broke the peaceful silence, but he did so with a motion of his other arm, and a kiss to Harry's forehead. When Harry looked up from his father's chest, he saw that the wizard was using his wand to hover a medium-sized package wrapped in the glorious purple that was his son's favourite colour.

"What is it?" asked Harry as he sat up, his green eyes glittering with wonder over the splendidly wrapped gift.

"I think the only way to answer that, son, is to open it," a chuckle rumbled softly in Snape's chest, and although Harry couldn't see it, he knew that his father's smile was also in his eyes.

Harry took hold of the gift and was a little startled at how heavy it was as it landed upon his lap. It didn't hurt his legs, so he started to unwrap it by taking off the garishly red bow, and then attacking the foil paper.

Underneath the paper was a burlwood box, highly polished, with gold corners, and a gold hook and latch that matched. Before Harry could unlatch the box, Snape's hand landed upon the lid, his fingers splayed.

"I have a question for you, Harry," began Snape. "I have overheard you and your friends talk about plans for the future; Auror being the most popular career amongst all boys," Snape's eyes rolled very briefly. "However, I have yet to hear what you would like to do with your life. Have you ever given thought to it?"

Harry bit his lower lip, and then looked down at his slippered feet as they knocked together uneasily. His hands gripped the sides of the burlwood box possessively.

"Auror?" he said with question, not even looking up at his father.

Snape's hand left the box as a finger tipped up his child's face so he could look into those wide eyes that were obviously hiding something. He shook his head. "No. I do not think that is what you want, nor is it the answer I am looking for," said Snape knowingly.

"Well," hedged Harry, "it's... uhm... silly. I mean, Draco would say it was. I mean, even he told his dad he wanted to be an Auror." Harry's eyes blinked. "Don't you want me to be an Auror?"

"I want you to be what makes you happy, Harry," Snape replied. "Some parents feel that eleven is too young to make a decision that will affect you in your future, and I am not asking that you do so. However, I do want you to think of what you will do in the future, and I wish it to be something that gives you joy."

Harry's brow was slightly wrinkled as he gave serious consideration to his father's words. "Do you mean like potions make you happy, Dad?" He frowned. "You love potions, right? And, teaching?"

Snape smirked gently. "Yes, potions do make me happy. Teaching? Well, not so much. Potions are a magical art in which I feel at my most creative. It annoys me when an experiment does not work out, but it is satisfying when eventually it does."

Harry smiled. "That's why I like to draw," he nodded. "It's fun to draw things I see, but then, I can also draw stuff that my mind makes up. A lot of times, though, I get mad when I can't do something that seems so simple. You know, like when I was trying to draw some stairs going up, but I couldn't make them look like they were going up?"

"The technique of perspective," Snape said, as he, too, recalled the time he had Harry in their quarters at Hogwarts and his son has decided to do some drawing after his homework was finished. Harry had been upset that his drawing had not looked right.

"Yeah! Perspective!" grinned Harry. "That was so neat how you explained perspective and showed me how to draw the box so it was three-dimensional instead of just a square."

"Perhaps you would like to be an artist, someday?" asked Snape.

"I... yeah... but I don't think Draco would like that," he said with a disappointed sigh.

Snape frowned. "One does not choose one's passions because of what others think, Harry." He placed the palm of his hand over his son's heart. "You choose to do what you want in your life because it

gives you joy; because it means something to you." His hand left Harry's heart, and one finger flipped the gold latch, and then lifted the lid of the box.

Harry let out a gasp as he saw held within the beautiful box was the wondrous drawing set from Gepetto's. Along with the seven bottles of ink, and the seven, silver-nibbed quills, there were other bottles of ink in shades of brown, green, red, and blue. The astonished, and well surprised little boy, very lightly ran his fingers over the inks, and the quills. In doing so, he saw a scroll tucked between the drawing set and the extra inks. Curious, he picked up the scroll that was tied with a green ribbon. Carefully untying it, he then unrolled the scroll, and saw that it was written in his father's spiky hand.

Harry read it aloud, "To my beloved son, Harry. I give unto you the means of illustrating the wonders of the world around you, and bringing to parchment the beauty of your dreams. Your loving father, Severus."

Snape endured the awkward embrace of his son's arms suddenly wrapped around his neck in order to bend his father down just enough so Harry could kiss his cheek.

Now, Snape thought to himself, this is Christmas!

A/N: Well, I truly meant to get this up on Christmas Day, but you know how holidays just have a way of pushing aside other things! At least it is only a few days since. I hope everyone had a good holiday, filled with friends, family, and good food.

I would like to thank everyone for letting me know how much this story gives them joy, and that I am a decent enough writer that many of you are willing to wait as long as it takes for that next chapter. I will continue with long chapters, but maybe not as much as 10,000 words or more. I think this will allow me to post a bit sooner. I would like to get back to posting a chapter every two weeks.

Now, was Madame Pomfrey a surprise? There will not be a mother, too soon, in Harry's future, but maybe Narcissa will stop with the march-making for a bit?

## Severus Snape's Third Year at Hogwarts

Salazar Slytherin was either a very clever wizard, paranoid, or simply loved secrets. Out of the four Founders, it was Salazar who had the most intriguing secrets within the stony walls of Hogwarts. One of those secrets had been discovered a long time ago by a third year Slytherin who was trying to evade four bullies who had the intention to severely worry his backside with Stinging Hexes.

Severus Snape had gone down to the dungeons, and for a short time had hidden in the Slytherin common room, but there he faced teasing from his Slytherin fellows who bothered him about running from Gryffindors. Severus had left under a dark cloud of annoyance, and had nearly run into Potter, and Black, two of the four who never seemed content to allow him a moment of peace. How they knew of where the Slytherin common room was, he didn't know, but at least he had seen them first, and he dashed down the corridor in the other direction.

James, and Sirius had heard the distinctive clacking of Snivellus' over-sized, pointy-toed boots, and the chase was on.

An hour later, an exhausted, and thoroughly bewildered Severus Snape wondered, once again, how the two nitwits kept finding him, in the dungeons, when neither had an entire brain cell between the two of them!

He had been caught by two Stinging Hexes; one upon his posterior, the other on his upper left thigh. Severus was sure he'd gotten Potter with an Acne Hex, and he had certainly hit Black with a Nose Enlarging Hex. He was angry enough that he was contemplating a nasty curse that would obliterate both Gryffindors permanently, when, as he leaned against the wall to catch his breath, he fell through into deep shadows.

A Lumos, meant to light his wand, also lit a series of torches placed several feet apart as they vanished downward. Had Severus fallen a bit further, he would have had a painful trip down a narrow, walled in, spiral staircase. He glanced behind himself to find that whatever hole, or door he'd slipped through, was gone. There was no choice but to venture further down, and explore.

The spiral staircase descended to a ridiculous depth and Severus, who prided himself on never being weak, felt rather dizzy once he did reach the bottom. Unconcerned with what might be around him, he thumped his seat down onto the bottom stair, and lowered his head. He didn't lift it until his thoughts had settled back into place once more.

What Severus saw, at first, really was nothing to get excited about. Ahead of him, lit by more torches spaced much further apart than on the stairs, was a long tunnel, that appeared to vanish in a turn, just ahead.

Severus stood, and walked down the corridor, discovering that there were, indeed, wonders to get excited about.

Friday, January 3rd, 1992

The Dungeon Under the Dungeon, that hidden tunnel Snape had found so long ago in his third year had been his secret alone until he had revealed it to Poppy.

The medi-witch had been suitably impressed as they wandered down the torch lit corridor – corridor being a friendly term – for something that hadn't been excavated and carved out by an expert in building design. There were niches of shelves that held books, or artefacts. The artefacts were from simple toys to magnificent creations that would even make the Headmaster drool if he saw them. Larger rooms, that were off-shoots from the tunnel either lay empty, or were cluttered with old furniture, armor, and all manner of oddities. Poppy had stared at the one room that was filled to the ceiling with bolts of Acromantula Spider Silk cloth. Some bolts were black, and now she knew what cloth Snape had his robes, and some of his suits made from.

Snape smirked, and nudged the medi-witch gently with his elbow. "I am amenable to sharing, Poppy."

The medi-witch turned bright eyes onto the Potions Master, and he could see in the shine the hope of a much younger, yet still very lovely witch. "May I?" she asked, nearly like the school girl she once had been. Snape nodded, and then watched with some pleasure as Poppy, with proper gravity, entered the room of silk, and began touching the fabric that spilled over other bolts, and flowed like

coloured water upon the floor. She was so caught up in her exploration that she wasn't aware of Snape until he was right beside her.

"You would look quite the lady in a traveling outfit in this, Poppy," Snape's silken voice had been insinuating itself within the medi-witch since the Winter Ball in ways that... well, she was sure they weren't entirely appropriate.

Poppy's eyes glanced down at the Damask rose shaded Acromantula silk that Snape held against her hand. For a moment she allowed herself to imagine a long jacket over a gown all of the same rose. "Wait! Did you say traveling outfit, Severus?" Poppy gave him a stern, and questioning glare.

"I have been considering visiting an old house that my mother owned in New England. It is in a Muggle village, but I think you would find that a traveling outfit, perhaps just a little modernised, would still look well." Poppy scowled. The Potions professor had one of those tiny, rather know-it-all smirks dancing across his lips. She didn't often see such an expression, but she knew it was smugly secretive.

"Severus Snape, whatever are you planning, and what makes you think I would kow-tow to your plans?" she demanded.

Snape's face shadowed as he smoothly tucked away his amusement. "Merely an invitation to visit, Poppy. I would hardly care to impose upon any plans you have for the Summer." He then escorted her out of the silk room, and led her down to the furthest end of the corridor.

Since that day when Snape had revealed the hidden tunnel, Poppy had visited, thrice daily.

At the end of the tunnel within a small chamber, roughly ovoid in shape, upon a narrow hospital cot, lay Quirinus Quirrell. Runes covered the quilt that was draped over him, and more runes were carved into the walls, and the floor, and the threshold of the door. Snape, utilising the Rune Craft he had been taught by Lucius, used the runes to weave wards, and spells, that kept not only Quirrell in a deep, protective sleep, but served to confuse the Fiend, Voldemort, so that he was unable to break through spells, and wards.

Poppy would visit her patient to spell Nutrition Potion into him, to run Diagnostics, including a spell that Snape had taught her that would monitor the Fiend. She would then Scourgify his clothing. Every three days she would sponge bathe him the Muggle way. Cleaning spells were simply too harsh to use on long-term comatose patients.

Snape, himself, visited once right before the night of the Winter Ball to double check all the spells and wards he had placed. It had also given him one, last chance, to encourage the medi-witch to be a true friend, and to help him foist off Narcissa's match-making attentions.

As Poppy glided down the corridor (Oh Merlin! Do I glide now?), a waltz from the night of the Winter Ball crossed her lips.

She really wasn't a woman for dancing, and parties, and all that fol-de-rol. The truth was, when she was a teenager there had been no boys at her beck and call to escort her to such frivolities. Poppy had never really thought much of her looks, and so, when her mentor had suggested that she 'age' herself for her position at Hogwarts, she did so without a second thought. A few grey hairs, and a touch of smile wrinkles at the corners of her eyes, had been enough. Except for one Slytherin boy who had the uncanny ability to see through her glamour his second year.

From that point on, Poppy had begun to earn Severus Snape's trust. She not only patched him up from the many fights he got into with the Marauders, but the medi-witch alone had forgiven him for the Dark Mark weeks before the Headmaster had done so. After that, it was Poppy who patched the Potions Master up after the horrid meetings with the Dark Lord. It was she that nursed him when Voldemort's punishments were nearly deadly to the man. Poppy was also the only one who knew about the nightmares that Snape suffered from, and it was she who held him when they became too much.

They had always been friends; something Dumbledore seemed to take for granted since Poppy herself was an alumni of Slytherin. He never thought to question their friendship, and in fact, the two Slytherins kept it quiet. Neither, it seemed, wanted to do anything to jeopardise the friendship.



Poppy had refused Snape's invitation to the Winter Ball as a matter of course, at first. She then 'reminded' the younger wizard that she did have Quirrell to attend to.

The Potions Master was, it seemed, rather terrified of dealing with Narcissa Malfoy, and so Snape had been persistent. Poppy finally relented, and to her surprise, had quite enjoyed herself.

It was the end of the evening that still had the matron 'gliding' along floors. As she dealt perfunctorily with Quirrell's body, Poppy's mind drifted back to that night at the Winter Ball.

Snape had led Madame Pomfrey out onto the balcony that was warmed with Warming Charms. For a quiet, and slightly uneasy moment, they both looked out upon the Winter wonderland of the Malfoy front lawn, until Snape spoke quietly.

"You really are quite lovely, Poppy." The wizard's voice was so low that Poppy almost had not heard the compliment. As he had begun to speak, though, she had automatically leaned closer.

Poppy smiled, then looked down at her gown. "The dress is quite out of date, Severus. I even heard one witch in there mention to Narcissa that it was 'common'."

Snape glowered, and he glanced over his shoulder at the dancers inside the ballroom. "Who said that? Do you mean that viper with the outrageously tall hair?"

Poppy laughed, and nodded. "You did see her get caught in one of the decorations, didn't you?" Snape smirked in reply. "She'll think twice about a hair style that tall again."

The awkward silence was back between witch and wizard, and Poppy was thinking to herself that it would be best to leave now before it got any worse. She faced the tall man beside her, and smiled up at him. "I really did have a nice..."

The kiss was so unexpected that Poppy was frozen in place. After a second's breath, her senses were... nearly back... and she found herself wrapping her arms around the Potions Master, kissing him back.

Just as quickly as the kiss had appeared, it was too quickly gone, and Poppy, feeling breathless, happily delirious, had to frown as Snape apologised for his actions.

"You take that apology back, Severus Snape!" the woman hissed, causing Snape's eyes to widen with surprise. "I would not have kissed you had I any objection, so don't you dare try to tell me you regret what you just did!"

"It is not that, Poppy," Snape spoke softly, just loud enough for the both of them. He had leaned forward so that his forehead brushed hers. "To be honest, I have wished to do that for quite some time, but I never had a proper excuse. The reason I am apologising, though, is that I cannot indulge myself, now. I have a son..." his voice faded.

Poppy brushed her lips to his, and smiled. "You know that I understand, Severus. Harry needs his father, and only his father. When he is truly happy, and secure with you, then... perhaps... if you wish to pursue this moment?"

Poppy's cheeks flushed with warmth, and Snape drew the lovely woman into his embrace. He laid his cheek against the soft hair upon her head, and breathed in the scent of wildflowers.

The medi-witch finished with Professor Quirrell. She regarded him, leaned over and plumped his pillow, and fixed his blanket so that it was smooth across his arms and chest. She turned, and with a gentle smile upon her lips, she left the small cell, humming a waltz under her breath. And, wondering about collecting some of the Damask rose silk from the silk room.

The Potions Master was seated by the fire in his favourite chair trying to go over his lesson plans, and doing a very poor job of it. His index finger kept brushing against his lips, and every once in awhile a rather dreamy smile would ghost across those same lips, and vanish in a breath.

Thoughts of the comely medi-witch were thrust from his mind as he heard, "Dad? I put everything away. What can I do now?"

Harry came to lean against the arm of Snape's chair. His father frowned down at him. "What can you do? Merlin, Harry! You have

half a toy store in your room, and quite a respectable drawing set. I would think you would have quite a bit to keep you busy."

Harry raised a shoulder, shrugging. "Yeah. I know." His finger traced over the leather of the arm of the chair. Snape watched as the traveling index finger made its way onto his fingers, and then the child's hand curled into his. "Draco's not going to be back forever..."

Snape interrupted, "Draco, and Hermione will be back with all the other students Sunday evening, son. That is not forever."

"Yeah, okay," Harry conceded with a small smile, that he aimed up at his father. "Isn't there something we can do? I mean, I know you said you gotta do all that school stuff before everyone comes back, but maybe you and I can do something? Or maybe I can help?"

"I think having you assist me with lesson plans would give you an unfair advantage over your friends," Snape's mouth went up in that teasing smirk Harry was familiar with. "Ah! I know," said Snape as the smirk deepened, "You could do lines, or an essay, or..."

"Daaad!" Harry protested. "That's like punishment and homework stuff! Isn't there something fun we can do? Do you have some potions to brew for Madame Pomfrey?"

Snape's eyes blinked in remembrance. Sending his book of lesson plans to his desk, he rose from his chair. Harry's brow beetled as he watched his father. "There is something we need to do, and I completely forgot you wanted to take care of this after Christmas."

Harry gave his father a wary look. He was sure that whatever it was, was not fun, and not something he wanted to do today. He decided that he'd go back to his room. "I think I'm going to go read," Harry said a bit glumly.

"Oh, no you are not, Harry. Come along. We are going to the Infirmary to find out what your balance problem with wizarding modes of travel is." Snape opened the door of his quarters that led directly into the dungeon corridor, and motioned his son to follow. "We shall walk."

Harry huffed in indignation. Definitely NOT fun!

Madame Pomfrey was only a few minutes behind the arrival of Harry and his father. Seeing the disgruntled look on the boy's face, and the arms across his chest that was a very Snape-ish mannerism, the medi-witch squelched her amused smile, and turned to the Potions Master.

"Has Mr. Snape a problem?" she asked both.

"No," Harry huffed.

"Yes," countered his father. Snape went on to explain while Poppy led them over to a cleanly made bed for Harry to sit upon. "Harry has been having dizzy spells whenever he travels by Floo, and he has experienced some nausea. Portkey travel seems to cause the same problem. However, as you well know, flying on a broom gives him no trouble at all."

Poppy waved her wand over Harry and he stared in boredom at a corner of the Infirmary. "Well, most magical children raised in a magical home get used to wizarding travel just by the sheer frequency of it. A child Harry's age is going to find such travel upsetting for awhile." She glanced down at Harry until she had his attention. "You never did travel by Floo or Portkey before coming here, is that right, Mr. Snape?"

"No," Harry shook his head. "But neither did Hermione and she's never been dizzy, or sicked up once!"

"And how often has the inestimable Miss Malfoy traveled by Floo?" Snape asked pointedly.

Harry grimaced. Other than Flooing to Malfoy Manor for the holidays, and then to Paris, he could not think of any other time that Hermione might have traveled in such a manner. Still, Hermione had been grace itself when emerging from the Floo at the Floo station before they continued on to France.

"Well, Hermione didn't trip when we went to Paris," Harry replied stubbornly.

"Mr. Snape," chided Madame Pomfrey, "some children develop a sense of balance either naturally, or through such things as dance.

As I understand it, Miss Malfoy's Muggle parents sent her to dance class at a very early age."

Harry glared past both adults, and muttered, "I'm not gonna learn how to dance."

Snape let out an amused snort, and Madame Pomfrey smiled. "I don't think that's necessary, dear," she said patting Harry's shoulder. "I haven't found a thing wrong. It is just going to take a bit of concentration, and maybe a small dose of Anti-Nausea Potion now and then."

Harry huffed out a sigh of relief and smiled at that. Poppy indicated that Snape needed to step aside with her out of the child's hearing. Concerned, still, Snape followed as they moved towards one of the Infirmary's tall windows.

"I didn't want to say this in Harry's hearing, Severus, because I know he's sensitive about being small for his age, but his trouble with Floo, and Portkey travel is due to his stunted growth at his reprehensible family's hands. He is growing," the medi-witch assured him, "And he will have a growth spurt, possibly when he is thirteen, but he is unfortunately still the size of a nine-year old child. All small children have difficulties with wizarding travel due to the fact they are growing, and balance can be an issue."

Snape sighed. "Harry is going to get incredibly frustrated with this issue before the anticipated growth spurt, Poppy. Is there not something that can be done?"

Poppy smiled, and nodded. "I know he isn't going to want to dance, but there are other disciplines that can help with a child's control over their balance. I know you were going to start training him in Defense next year, but perhaps there is something you can teach him now?"

"Shield spells," Snape said thoughtfully, "but to use them in, say, a mock duel..." the Potions Master shook his head slowly. "It is too taxing upon his magic."

"And his magic is tied into his growth, Severus," nodded Poppy, her mouth a somewhat grim line. "It's like that with all children."

"I know, Poppy," Snape's voice was testy. "Why else do the first years get mostly theory in classes?"

"Then teach your son to dance!" the medi-witch snapped huffily. "Either that, or you and Harry will both have to put up with his dizziness until his balance settles." Madame Pomfrey raised her voice so Harry could hear her, "Mr. Snape! You're released." She then tried to flounce briskly away but was stopped by a hand catching hers.

"Poppy," Snape said quietly, and she glanced down at his thumb moving softly over the back of her hand. "Thank you for taking care of my son. I shall think of some exercise to help him." He started to give her a formal nod, but then he leaned over, and placed a chaste kiss to her cheek. While she was still blushing, and a bit stunned, Snape turned away and gathered his son.

Just as they left the Infirmary, Poppy came out of her stupor and heard Harry ask, "Dad? You kissed Madame Pomfrey. How come you did that?"

Saturday, Jan. 4th, 1992

Severus,

My contact in Egypt, Dr. Noorahm Hemdawws, has come through more than I had expected. Not only did Dr. Hemdawws have the scroll that I spoke to you of many months ago, but he had the artefact as well. It cost rather a sizable donation to his museum, and funding to his current archeological project. The Hourglass of Anubis is nothing more than a costly trinket to Muggles. There is a problem, though, and I shall speak to you of it when I visit on the thirteenth. Little League Quidditch practice will begin on that day, and young Harry will receive notification on Monday.

Lucius

Monday, Jan. 6th, 1992

Term at Hogwarts began on Monday with chatter from all the students reliving their holiday with their friends. Classes intruded

without thought to the holidays, though, with revisions, essays, quizzes, and practicals.

Monday evening saw the return of the little study group that met in the annex off of Snape's office. Snape was busy with a stack of quizzes as the twins, Fred and George Weasley arrived, but with them were Neville, and a thoroughly nervous Ron Weasley who was trying to pretend he wasn't holding onto a fold of Fred's school robes.

"Mr. Ronald Weasley," Snape drew out the boy's name dangerously, and with a predatory smile brushing his lips. Ron's cheeks whitened, making the freckles stand out. He leaned in closer to Fred, and Fred put an arm on his little brother's shoulder.

"Ronnie," George hissed in the smallest redhead's ear. "You have something to say to the professor!"

Harry and Draco, flanking Hermione protectively, peered out of the annex, just as Neville scurried over to join them.

"Ah... uhm... sir..." Ron felt suddenly thirsty as he gaped a bit.

"I am listening, Mr. Weasley," Snape spoke quietly.

"M-my mum talked to... uhm... McGonagall..."

Snape interrupted smoothly, "Professor McGonagall."

"Right! Professor McGonagall said I'm s'posed to study w-with..." he glanced uneasily over his shoulder.

The Potions Master decided not to wait for the young first year's explanation. He already knew that Molly Weasley and Minerva had discussed a further punishment for the boy, after what he had done to Hermione when she was still a Gryffindor. Minerva had suggested that Ron work with the study group, and Snape, after some discussion, had agreed conditionally. The boy would need to apologise to the girl, and then it was up to her if she wanted to be saddled with him in her study group.

"Mr. Weasley, I think you need to speak to Miss Malfoy, first, and then we shall allow her to decide..."

"Miss Malfoy?" Ron blurted in puzzlement. "Who's that?"

Hermione stepped out of the small study and into her professor's office. "I am." Hermione crossed her arms defensively over her chest.

Fred nudged Ron. "We told you about this, Ronnie. Hermione's been adopted by the Malfoys." He then scooted his brother towards Hermione. "Apologise."

Ron's mouth dropped open again, but he gathered himself with a deep fortifying breath, and began, "Er, Hermione." His eyes dropped to the floor.

Snape was about to admonish the Gryffindor, when Hermione spouted what he would have said, "Look at me, Ron, if you mean to be sincere."

Ron's head snapped up. "Yeah, sorry. I mean, well, about what me and Seamus, and Dean did, Hermione." Hermione's lips thinned at the memory of the assault from the three Gryffindors; who had been her House mates, at the time. "It was bad. I mean, we were bad. I mean, I was. I don't even know why I was so stupid, and mean, and it all just went pear-shaped, you know?" Ron bit his lower lip, as he heard Professor Snape clearing his throat in disapproval.

"What are you trying to say, Ron?" asked Hermione sharply.

Ron blurted, "I'm sorry! I don't got an excuse, but..." he shrugged helplessly. "I was stupid, and mum was real mad at me. Disappointed, too. So was my dad. I thought he wouldn't talk to me no more. S'pose I would have deserved it."

Hermione's voice was taut, and everyone could hear the hurt still in her voice. "I didn't deserve what you boys did, Ron. I know you didn't do the worst, but you were there always saying some of the most terrible things about me, and that hurt even more." Her voice rose, as she stepped suddenly closer to Ron. "I'm a nice person, and I never hurt you! I know I was being ignored, and I was being a prat, and all, but you never let me alone with all those things you said, and got everyone else to say, too! It was cruel!" Suddenly both her hands struck Ron's chest, knocking him back so he fell against Fred, who caught him.



Ron pulled away from Fred, who thought his little brother was going to get mad, but the red-head didn't. "You're right, Hermione. I shouldn't have done any of that and I really am sorry. My mum wants me to study with my brothers, but since they've been helping you guys, I won't if you don't want me around."

Hermione, who was feeling a bit alone, was pleased when Draco moved to stand next to her. "'Mione's my sister, now, Weasley," he sneered. "That means you better not do anything that hurts her ever again because I'll hurt you, and then my father will sue yours!"

"Mr. Malfoy!" Snape chided sharply. "We will have no threats of litigation here. This is between Mr. Weasley, and Miss Malfoy. We shall let your sister decide, now."

Draco's lips thinned, and he crossed his arms belligerently over his chest as he glared at the youngest Weasley.

Hermione was staring at Ron Weasley. In her head she heard all of the insults the boy had said to the other Gryffindors to stir them up. At first, it seemed everyone in Gryffindor was willing to punish her for her detentions, and points losses, at Ron's instigation. The followers began to drop off, though. It was Dean Thomas, Seamus Finnegan, and Ron Weasley who just couldn't let it go. Even when others lost points, or got detentions, those three castigated her.

It had hurt her. Deeply. However, she had survived similar taunting in primary school, and she thought she could weather this, as well. Hermione never expected an assault by all three boys. What they had done was beyond anything Hermione had ever experienced. It was beyond cruel; it was criminal. One boy had been expelled, for good. Another had received a very long suspension. Yet, Ron Weasley, who for once was NOT the instigator, yet had done nothing to help her, had received the lightest sentence.

Hermione wasn't really sure how she should feel. There was a part of her that wanted to physically hurt the boy, but then there was another part that just wanted it all behind her.

Why, though, she had to wonder, did Professor McGonagall think it was a punishment to Ron to make him study with her?

Snape was watching the girl's features and he could clearly see the byplay of old anger, and confusion. He grit his teeth. He had been incensed with Minerva when she came to him with the suggestion that the youngest Weasley ought to be reprimanded further by studying with the child he had so victimised! And he had allowed it? Dunderhead! he kicked himself mentally. Obviously Hermione had a problem with the punishment, as well. He needed to fix this.

"Miss Malfoy," he summoned the girl over to his side of his desk with a crook of his finger. Hermione quickly moved over to her teacher and listened earnestly as he spoke for her hearing alone. "You shall not accept this, Miss Granger. I can see that you feel it is another insult to you, rather than a punishment to Mr. Weasley. Why I allowed this... clearly I was not thinking."

Hermione whispered into the older wizard's ear, "I know you wouldn't hurt me, sir, but why is Professor McGonagall doing this to me?"

Snape's lips thinned to a razor anger. The last thing he had wanted was for the child to feel once again the one who had done wrong. He stood, his hand upon the girl's shoulder.

"This will not suit, Mr. Weasley," declared Snape. "I realise what your mother was thinking, but I feel it is best that you catch up on your studies with your House mates." The Head of Slytherin House was a little startled (though he didn't show it) that both the twins were nodding in agreement with him.

Ron let out a sigh, partly of relief. "Sure, sir."

George spoke up, "I'll take little Ronnikins back to Gryffindor tower, sir." Ron tried to scowl at his brother for the nickname, but George scowled right back. "Let's go, Ron. Professor McGonagall will probably have some lines or such for you to do instead."

The remaining students watched as George left with Ron. Hermione, though, looked up at Professor Snape, and smiled at him. He scowled, and let out a harrumph.

Monday, Jan. 6th, 1992 - end of the day

"You really should have insisted, Severus," said Minerva, her tongue clucking annoyingly.

Snape had been invited... no, summoned... to Professor McGonagall's office, and he was not happy about it.

"I distinctly recall saying when I arrived here, Minerva, that I believe this is an issue that the Deputy Headmaster should iron out. Therefore, I will say nothing more on the matter."

Minerva pursed her lips in frustration. She then sighed, and asked, "Tea, then, Severus?"

Snape simply shook his head and remained stiffly seated in the far too comfortable chair.

A knock soon came on Minerva's office door, and Snape rose to greet Remus Lupin. He looked to the Transfiguration teacher, and then to Snape.

"You asked for me, Professor Snape?"

Snape was pleased at the lack of friendly overtures. Lupin had gone right to business. He nodded, "I did, Professor Lupin. I asked you here because I do not believe that you are aware that Molly Weasley had requested a further reprimand for her youngest son upon his return. I was remiss as well in not informing you at once when this arose."

"Severus!" Minerva said with annoyance. "This is hardly a matter for the Deputy!"

Snape scowled at the witch in annoyance. "On the contrary, Professor McGonagall," he corrected staunchly. "Ronald Weasley was suspended after an egregious attack upon the person of Hermione Malfoy. Anything to do with him as he integrates back into school life ought to be the purview of the Deputy Headmaster."

"He is in my House!" Minerva ground out sharply.

"Yes, Ronald Weasley is in Gryffindor," interrupted Lupin. "But, as you recall, I am not only the Deputy Headmaster, but the Head of Gryffindor House. You have no jurisdiction over the students beyond

your classroom, Minerva." Lupin used her name to soften the blow of his reminder.

"But Molly spoke to me," she asserted, most of her bluster gone from her voice.

"And that is when you should have brought the issue to me," concluded Lupin. He sighed in disappointment. "I agree that Mr. Weasley owed Miss Malfoy an apology, but to further subject the girl to the presence of her bully was cruel..." he paused, and then said with some hardness, "...on your part, Minerva." Lupin's rebuke was not finished, as he turned to the Potions Master. "On the other hand, Severus, as soon as you heard of this, you should have contacted me." Snape frowned at the reprimand since he had already acknowledged his part in the whole thing. "I am going to take this matter in hand so neither of you have to deal with it further. Severus, you can assure Miss Malfoy that she is under no obligation to deal with Ronald Weasley, unless she so chooses."

Lupin gave each teacher a nod, and then smoothly left the Transfiguration teacher's office.

"Well! He's a bit jumped up!" scathed Minerva.

"And you weren't?" Snape retorted pointedly. "Minerva," his voice was a bit more gentle, "you really do need to remember that you are no longer Head of Gryffindor."

"It's still my House, Severus!" she snapped. The witch then seemed to wilt in upon herself. "Oh Merlin! I know I should have said something to Remus, but truly I saw nothing wrong with Molly's request."

Snape returned to his chair. He wanted to point out that this was another habit of Gryffindors; that they rarely paused to think, but he said nothing on that. After all, he cringed inwardly, he had not thought it out, either. It did bother him to see how hard Minerva was taking the reminder that she had lost so much influence in the school. "That was, perhaps an understandable error, but you and I both seemed to forget that it was Remus who should have dealt with this at the outset."

Minerva nodded. "How is Hermione doing, Severus?"

"She is a child, and is choosing to bounce back from this," Snape replied.

Minerva's face clouded somewhat, "So she is truly doing well in Slytherin?"

Snape regarded her with a little puzzlement. Was that Gryffindor prejudice against Slytherins still there? "Quite well," he said slowly. "Miss Malfoy has been accepted by more of the Slytherins than I initially thought she would. Better now since the adoption. No one would dare question a Malfoy for bringing a Muggle-born into their home." The Potions Master then seemed to shrug. "The girl does still appear to wear her heart on her sleeve, though."

Minerva snorted delicately, "Like a Gryffindor!"

Friday, Jan. 10th, 1992

The first week of the new term went smoothly, but Snape did note that the Headmaster seemed to be pointedly avoiding him, other than the obligatory staff meeting at the end of the week. That was normal enough, but then Dumbledore had held back Snape, Minerva, Pomona Sprout, and Hagrid at the end of the meeting. Himself, and the others, Snape noted, had been the contributors of the ridiculous obstacle course the Headmaster had them create to confound anyone seeking after the stone. This meeting was short, and was simply a notification from Dumbledore that he had dismantled their puzzles. The Headmaster had then dismissed everyone but Snape.

"Do you think that Quirrell might have acquired the Philosopher's Stone, Headmaster?" asked Snape, finding himself suppressing a yawn. Staff meetings were notoriously boring, and these further, little meetings only put Snape's nerves on edge especially since the Headmaster had been avoiding his presence.

"I believe that if he were in possession of the Stone we would know of it." Dumbledore ran his fingers through the length of his beard. "I have been wondering if perhaps Miss Granger..."

The Headmaster was interrupted by a smooth correction from Snape, "Miss Malfoy."

"Yes, yes," Dumbledore said with an irritated wave of his hand. Snape scowled softly. He was not aware that the Headmaster had any problem with the adoption. "Miss Malfoy's unfortunate encounter with the Mirror of Erised may have given the child the Philosopher's Stone, Severus. I would like for you to search for it, and also to watch her carefully."

Snape erased his scowl, and listened since there was not much that he knew about the Stone. "I can have her trunk and dorm searched as part of my monthly inspections. What, precisely, though, am I looking for?"

"When the Stone is in its quiescent state, it is rather unremarkable looking. A bit like a chunk of granite," explained Dumbledore.

"Quiescent?" inquired Snape.

Dumbledore smiled gently. "The Philosopher's Stone has a curious property in that it turns crimson, becomes like a fiery stone as it comes near someone who desires it for its intended use. Perenelle used to tell myself and Nicolas that she could hear it sing," the older wizard chuckled. "Neither of us ever heard it sing, so we both attributed that possibility to one of Perenelle's fancies." Dumbledore raised himself from his chair. "One thing you must be wary of, Severus, if Miss Granger does have the Stone. She may become very reluctant to let go of it."

"Miss Malfoy," Snape again corrected, and this time he caught the brief flash of annoyance in the Headmaster's features.

"Just be careful, Severus. Good day." With that terse farewell, Snape knew he was dismissed to teach his classes.

Monday, Jan 13th, 1992

Snape looked down at a discoloured alabaster box that Lucius had left in his care after they had met that afternoon before Little League Quidditch practice. On its lid, and sides, were drawings of the Egyptian Jackal Headed God, Anubis and figures in white robes. The drawing on the lid was more striking with Anubis in a semi-circle of the white robed figures. Two white robed figures were escorting a naked man to where Anubis stood. Before Anubis was an artefact

that looked like nothing more than an hourglass with sand suspended in the top half of the glass.

Within the box was the Hourglass of Anubis. An ancient artefact created by a wizard. Legend told that the hourglass was a tool used to determine if a criminal's soul was Dark or Light. If the soul was Light, there were no consequences, but if the soul were Dark, supposedly Anubis himself would appear and devour the soul. Snape and Lucius both thought that the consequences sounded very much like the soul devouring Kiss of the Dementors; those mysterious, dark creatures that surrounded the wizarding prison, Azkaban. The Dementors were not discriminating as the hourglass was; they would take innocent or guilty soul alike.

"Good evening, Professor Snape!" Hermione Malfoy walked through his office door, a smile on her lips. Filing in behind her were Harry, Draco, Neville Longbottom, and then the twins.

"Good evening, Miss Malfoy." Snape's greeting was slightly absent-minded as he eyed the twins. Fred and George Weasley smiled affably, but then their smiles faltered at the grim smile that appeared on the Potions Master's lips. "Misters Weasley, a moment before you begin your study, please?"

Snape could not immediately speak to the twins as it took a few minutes to ensconce the other four students into their study niche, and then for the professor to erect a Silencing Spell that would keep their meeting private. He then motioned for the two identical Weasleys to sit and he pushed the alabaster box forward. He gave them a nod.

Both students were puzzled by the odd, decorative box, but George, the more curious, grasped the box, and ran his fingers over it nimbly. Anyone else would think that the boy was probably feeling the indentations of the ancient carvings. Snape knew that George Weasley was getting a Sense from the box and its contents. George, who was able to feel the aura of Dark magic, was using that talent to discover if the box, and the hourglass within, was a dark artefact. Frowning, he handed the box to his brother.

Just as George had lightly explored the box with his touch, so did Fred. Fred's Sense was to discover if the box and its artefact were magic of the Light. Finally, he frowned as well.

"Light," said Fred thoughtfully to his twin.

"Dark," countered George.

Both boys looked up at their teacher for an explanation. "Within the box is an ancient artefact known as the Hourglass of Anubis. It was created to detect a good soul from a bad soul. If a bad soul were encountered," Snape paused, giving each Weasley boy a knowing glare, "the Hourglass, or the spirit of Anubis within, would devour it."

George gulped and very carefully put the box down. For extra measure he then pushed it back at Snape. The Potions Master smirked.

Fred asked, "What will you do with something awful like that, sir?" There was a sarcastic joke on the tip of Fred's tongue, but the look on George's face that he had touched something disgusting, made him swallow his amusement.

"Meet me in my office at curfew, if you are still interested." Snape stood and lifted his wand, prepared to end the Silencing Spell over the door of the studying Silver Trio and Neville. His look centered darkly upon the twins, "I warn you both, though, what I reveal, if you are unable to assist me, will be Obliviated from your mind."

Fred suddenly wanted some chocolate, and he glanced over at his twin. George pierced his teacher with his own, blue-eyed gaze. He stretched out his hand, "Sir?"

With silent understanding, Snape nodded curtly, held out his hand, his right hand, and grasped the younger wizard's swift grip only for as long as it took George to breathe a sigh of relief.

George nodded, and smiled, "If whatever this is for could involve an Obliviation, well... we just had to be sure, sir."

Snape lifted his wand, then paused. He regarded George. With a short shake of his head, he lifted the spell, and indicated that the twins join their students.

A/N: Really, I have no excuses other than what went before. Spokane, WA is really getting an undecently heavy winter and we



have had a few power outages that meant my computer's battery was strained to its limits. As for my eyes, well, my appointment with the eye doc is at the beginning of March and I really hope something can be done. I do NOT want to stop writing.

I believe the end of Nobody Cared is on the horizon. The next chapter will let me know how close that is.

I am planning a sequel, but do not know if I will be able to write it. If I do, I could seriously use the help of a beta to catch those pesky commas, grammatical errors, and dangerous plot holes. The premise would be a murder mystery/romance. Think Jessica Fletcher and Cabot Cove, Maine.

If you are interested, contact me at my profile.

Lastly – a new (kind of) one-shot is up. It is called Professor Snape's Birthday Jan 9, 2011. This was originally a series of posts at the professor's Tumblr blog from well-wishers and fans. If you read the story you can find a link to the actual posts that were illustrated by fanart.

Change: Dr. Zahi Hawass has been changed to Dr. Noorahm Hemdawws. I have a high regard for Dr. Hawass (a real man), but there were a few folks who were offended at his name being in my fic.

Monday, Jan. 13th, 1992 - 10pm: Curfew

Fred and George Weasley had a secret. A map they had found one day when serving a particularly nasty detention with Argus Filch. It was a marvelous creation that showed nearly every room and corridor of Hogwarts castle. It also showed every person within the walls of Hogwarts, or on the grounds.

They were soon to discover that some places did not show on the map.

The twins arrived at Professor Snape's office just as curfew intoned solemnly through the castle. Ten of the clock and every student who obeyed these rules were in their common rooms, or in bed, fast asleep.

The professor, appearing to be a man consumed by a secret, merely crooked his index finger at the Weasley boys, and marched down into the depths of the dungeons. Fred and George glanced at each and traded an identical grin before trotting after their teacher.

Teacher and student traveled for quite a distance, in silence. Snape did wonder at this. He had not glanced back, but knew the duo were following him and he wondered why they had not, yet, begun to pester him with questions.

As for Fred and George, they were full of questions, but both had the feeling that to indulge that side of their natures would not be welcome. As they paced downward into darker depths, George discovered that his standard Lumos spell was barely offering him any light worth remarking on.

It was then that Snape stopped, and rather abruptly. George walked into Fred who had just barely missed walking into the Head of Slytherin House.

"Sir?" they chorused.

Snape held his wand over the three of them. His Lumos, though quite bright, just managed to drift over the three of them in its glow. George chanced a worried glance at the surrounding darkness, and for a very brief moment he felt like a scared first year. Fred's hand found his brother's and gripped it tightly in reassurance.

"This is a secret I discovered in my third year," began Snape, his dark voice nearly swallowed by the darkness around them. "It is a secret I have jealously guarded since then, but beneath us is something I know that only the two of you can help me with."

"And it involves..." began George.

"That box..." said Fred, motioning his chin towards the box that Snape still held firmly in one hand.

George finished, "The Hourglass of Anubis."

"I ask for your Wand Oath to keep this secret to yourselves," before both Gryffindors could jump to agreement, he slashed his wand down between them. The shadows dancing on the angles of their Potions Master's face unnerved the twins. "Before that, I will repeat my warning in my office; should I have to, I will Oblivate you both. This is one time I must count on that Gryffindor bravery from you both." Snape regarded them closely, and watched as Fred and George looked at him for a moment, and then at each other.

Finally, with a sharp nod, Fred smiled, "We'll take a Wand Oath, Professor, and no matter what your secret holds, we will not run away."

Snape was astounded to hear a complete sentence from one of the twins without the other finishing it. George grinned, and added, "Ditto from me, sir."

With the Wand Oath sealed with their magic, Snape leaned a shoulder against what should have been a solid rock wall, spoke a very soft, and rather lengthy incantation in a language neither twin recognised, and then there were torches flickering to life down a well of spiral staircase. Snape stepped onto the landing.

The Potions Master handed the box to Fred, and rummaged in his inner pocket for a phial of potion. He thumbed the cork off, and drank a measure. He then handed it to George. "Anti-Nausea Potion. The staircase is rather steep. You will need this."

George drank a measure of the potion, then took the box from his brother and gave him the last third in the phial. When all three were properly dosed, Snape led the way down the stairs.

Despite the potion, both twins were ready to catch their breath when they finally reached the end of the stairway. Another phial of Anti-Nausea Potion, and the twins were ready to continue down the tunnel.

Fred and George Weasley kept quiet, as well as they could, as they moved down the long, and twisted corridor. A glance over his shoulder caused Snape to smirk as he saw how their faces reflected their shared desire to explore to their hearts content. Perhaps, he thought to himself, if all was successful he might invite them down here for just such an award.

The twins suddenly stopped as if frozen by an Ice Spell. "Fred!" gasped George, looking into one of the side rooms. "Are you seeing what I am seeing?"

"If I'm not," whispered Fred, "We're dreaming!"

Snape stopped behind the two students. He had rather a sense that as they came down this room would capture their attention.

Within were ingredients carefully shelved, catalogued, and preserved that only a Potions Master could dream of. When Snape had returned to Hogwarts in a teaching capacity, he had spent hours speaking to the castle for its aid in creating a new tunnel that led from this room to his private Potions lab. It was nearly a year before the castle had acquiesced to his request.

"Take a moment," Snape urged the two fascinated boys.

Whatever the twins flaws were as pranksters, Snape had to admit that they were highly intelligent when it came to Potions. And, creative, as well. Something he intended to foster.

The twins entered the large room and discovered that all the ingredients were rare, obscure items that a Potions Master could wait an entire lifetime to use once in their work. They were to discover that most of the ingredients were magical, and some had not been seen in centuries.

"Rabbit's feet?" asked George curiously as he peered at one large jar that held furred objects that did resemble rabbits feet.

"Too large," frowned Fred, as he peered at the jar.

"Jackalope feet," came Snape's voice crawling up beside them, and giving them a startle.

"We've never..." said Fred.

"Heard of a jackalope." George concluded.

"From North America. A hybrid of the jack rabbit, and the antelope. They were an experiment by a wizard of some Dark repute who created hybrids," explained Snape, his voice a soft, lecture. "History records that he paid for his misdeeds by being eaten by the only cockatrice ever created." The twins eyed each other curiously. Snape smirked smugly, "A hybrid of basilisk and rooster. When the cockatrice crowed triumphantly over its kill, it destroyed itself since the mortal enemy of a basilisk is the rooster."

Snape ushered the twins out of the distracting ingredients closet and continued to lead them through the tunnel. Fred finally asked, "Professor, we realise this is your secret to keep, but just what is this place?"

Snape enlightened them, "It was not until I returned as a teacher and renewed my explorations down here that I unearthed an explanation of what this was..."

Severus was thinking of disappearing in his tunnel. There was junk to be found, but there were so many other things to keep his attention that he felt he could spend an eternity in his tunnel. Dropping into an overly plush leather chair he had removed from a room full of furniture, he had taken it into this room he had slowly begun to set up as a study. There was a large desk filled with ink bottles, quills, and parchment that was finer than he had ever seen. And then, books. Some were his, but many had come from several different places in niches or rooms along the length of the tunnel.

Yes, he mused as he leaned his head back on one arm of the chair and kicked his skinny legs over the other arm. He could live here.

That house elf that liked him would feed him, and he could forget about this Lord Voldemort that Lucius' father kept telling them about, and whom Severus was not all that eager to meet.

He opened the journal he had found that day near the end of the tunnel, and began to read.

"... the journal was one of several that had belonged to Salazar Slytherin. It did not mention this tunnel, but that particular journal detailed many of the journeys he had gone on in which he acquired many of the objects down here." Snape did not mention that the journal had also hinted at some live creature that Salazar had brought to live in another hidden chamber deep beneath the castle. He had, yet, to find anything else that would give him a clue as to what the creature had been (surely it was dead by now), and if this other chamber even existed.

After one more turn, the three finally came to their destination. Snape allowed the twins to enter the rune-carved chamber, and he watched silently as the two boys warily walked over to their old DADA professor.

"That's Quirrell," whispered George.

"He looks dead," concluded Fred.

"Rune magic," Snape said. His voice, although even, startled both young wizards. "It is all complex spells and wards that keep not only Quirrell's body asleep, but his mind, too." Snape stood over the absolutely still man, who was no longer covered by the horrible smelling purple turban. Using his hand, Snape carefully turned the comatose wizard's head so that part of his face was in the pillow, and the seemingly bald back of the man's head faced the twins.

Both Fred and George took a revolted step backwards. Fred actually had to turn away for a moment. "It's a face," whispered George. He was both fascinated, and repulsed by the abomination before him.

"Voldemort," Snape said simply.

Fred turned back. His freckles on his face stood out against his now sickly white pallor. "He's supposed to be dead."

With uncommon gentleness Snape re-positioned Quirrell's head so the face of Voldemort was now hidden. "Lily's magic protected Harry," began the Potions Master. "When Voldemort used the Killing Curse to try and kill them both, it unfortunately was successful with Lily, but her magic, an ancient Rune Magic of Protection, bounced the curse back to Voldemort, and thus disabling him to nearly the point of death."

A glance at the twins showed Snape that although they wanted to hear more, neither wanted to look upon the wizard in the bed while knowing what was hidden within him. The Potions professor ushered them out of the room and into an empty niche where there was a half-moon bench for the twins to sit upon. Snape remained standing.

"Voldemort's body was summarily destroyed which is why none of those searching for him could find him. His spirit survived, though, in a form that is known as a Fiend."

George's eyes flashed. "I know about those. Mum's friend, Granny Weatherwax told us a story about a Russian Fiend that ate children in order to prolong its life."

Fred nodded, "Oh yes, I remember that one, George. The witch that lived in a house on chicken feet." He shuddered.

George smirked, "That gave us both nightmares!"

"Mum hasn't had Granny Weatherwax over for a visit since then!" Fred chuckled.

"So Vol... uhm... it...?" asked George as his eyes went to the door of the now darkened chambered.

Fred finished, "You-Know-Who is a malevolent spirit inside our DADA teacher."

Snape nodded. "The Fiend had tried to manifest within Harry's nightmares, but the spirit of his mother kept the creature at bay. During their time at the Ministry, the Fiend was able to possess Harry, but his love for his friend, Draco, made it possible for his accidental magic to purge the Fiend, finally, from his body with the aid of a Patronus."

"Wicked!" breathed George and Fred together.

"Isn't that when Quirrell got sick?" asked Fred.

"It was," agreed Snape. "Somehow the backlash injured both Quirrell and Voldemort. It gave me the chance to keep the Fiend suppressed until I had prepared this chamber for them."

"That must have taken weeks, professor," commented George.

"I am not as skilled as I wish to be in the old magic of Runes and had to consult with a friend about what to precisely use. When I was ready, I then enlisted Madame Pomfrey's help to effect a plausible escape."

Fred's eyes widened in question, "Didn't the Headmaster help, professor?"

The older wizard's eyes darkened with old anger. "The Headmaster is of the mistaken belief that Voldemort and Harry's destinies are intertwined by a Prophecy." He glowered. "It is vile enough that Voldemort also believed what little he knew of the Prophecy and used it to target Lily and James Potter, and Frank and Alice Longbottom."

"The Longbottoms?" asked George in disbelief.

"You-Know-Who put the Longbottoms in St. Mungo's?" asked Fred.

"Mr. Longbottom rarely speaks about his parents, but they were targeted, as well, by Voldemort. Harry and Neville were both born on the same day. It was Lily's protection that saved Harry, and a bumbling madwoman who forgot her first duty to her Dark Lord that saved Neville." Snape eyed the two young wizards as they looked at each other for a few moments.

"We never realised..." began Fred.

"That little Nev could also have been..." said George sadly.

"The Chosen One." Fred shook his head.



George looked up at their teacher. "They're just two little boys, Professor."

"That they are," Snape agreed. "That is why I do not want Harry, nor Neville, growing up with the idea that some Dark creature is after either one." He really hadn't thought of Neville Longbottom's role in this farce before, but now that Snape was considering it, and the fact that Longbottom was being raised by his 'Miss Haversham' of a grandmother... both boys deserved a childhood free of monsters.

"Will you feed Quirrell's soul to..." began George, now looking pointedly at the alabaster box his teacher still held.

Fred finished, "To that?"

Snape held out the box, and touched his fingertips to the lid. "I would prefer not to feed Quirrell's soul to this." He then levitated the box onto a nearby, empty shelf. "This is why I asked for the two of you to come down here."

The Potions Master led the twins back into the rune endowed chamber. "I have had a look into Quirrell's mind, and although I believe he was not entirely blameless in providing a host for Voldemort, I do think this was not what he had expected."

George bravely stepped a bit closer to the comatose wizard. "What was his mind like, Professor?"

"Raped," Snape declared abruptly. He then amended himself, "No. The damage is much worse than that. Quirrell has been tortured."

"What do you need from us, sir?" asked Fred.

"I need to know the degree of Darkness in Quirrell's soul. I need to know if he is worth saving." His dark gaze fell heavily on the prone man before them. "I would like to know if this is knowledge you can give to me."

Snape, who so far thought that his son was a good boy, and not a sneak like James once had been, did not know that as soon as Harry was back with Draco and Hermione, the quest for Animagi forms was back in their heads.

An inquisitive Hermione, who was looking for someplace within Slytherin House to be by herself, discovered a room behind the large bookcase in the common room. It was filled with sneeze-producing dust, and a few cobwebs, and after she had let the boys in on her secret, the Trio cleaned it, after curfew.

It only took a few days to clean and then they were able to gather together to study more about Animagi.

"I don't want to do this anymore," declared Draco sullenly as he pushed aside the book on his lap.

Harry was in the corner of the room, with his arms crossed over his chest and a frown on his face. His notes had been shoved aside earlier and were scattered on the floor in front of Hermione.

Hermione had the main book of Animagus study on her lap and her expression showed her exasperation with her friend, and her brother.

"It doesn't hurt us to keep studying, and to do the meditations, Draco," she argued.

"It's boring, 'Mione!" Draco pouted. "Besides, me an' Harry do meditation at night."

Hermione glanced up. She had never heard about this. The girl was about to ask why the boys were meditating at night, when, from the corner, Harry added in an almost growl, "I'm not gonna steal ingredients from dad."

"That's why it's boring!" shouted Draco, as he pointed at Harry, and began to pace.

"Draco!" chided Hermione. "We can't make Harry do what he doesn't want to do."

"Yeah, but you can make me feel bad about it," Harry countered Hermione's cool words with his own sarcasm aimed at her.

Hermione glared at Harry. "This isn't my fault, Harry! You were the one who wanted to do this!"

"I still do," he said a bit plaintively.

"Then get the ingredients, Harry," Draco urged. "We've got everything else. And 'Mione could brew the potion."

"Just because she's got the highest grade in class doesn't mean she can brew this, Draco," countered Harry. "You heard what dad said in class when he gave us that gross lecture on 'Mishaps of Brewing'."

All three grimaced identically.

"I couldn't eat lunch after that one," said Draco, his grimace still on his face as he leaned back against the wall, and then slid down against it to his haunches.

"Your father wouldn't smack you?" asked Hermione of Harry.

"What?" Harry stared incredulously at the girl.

"I mean," she said slowly, "Professor Snape's never smacked you, so if you took the ingredients, he would just yell, or make you do some cleaning of cauldrons, right?"

Harry scowled at his friend. "No! He wouldn't smack me, but dad would be so disappointed that he might just send me back to my aunt!"

"Snape won't do that!" Draco protested.

"Of course he wouldn't, Harry," said Hermione, appalled at her friend's skewed logic. She closed the book on her lap, stood, and went over to Harry. "I'm sorry, Harry. I shouldn't have pushed..."

"Well, you did!" he snapped, a fierce frown on his face. His arms were gripped around his waist. "You're as mean as that Ron Weasley, Hermione!"

"That's not fair!" she cried out.

Draco's head tipped sideways, as he mused, "He's kind of right, 'Mione." Hermione turned a stricken gaze upon the tow-headed boy. "I mean, I don't think you're as mean as dumb Ron, but you should have really backed off."

Hermione stepped into Draco's face. He scrambled up to his feet in an attempt to back away. It was no good. Her finger was waving in his face. "You were pushing, too, Draco! You're a spoilt brat!"

"What's that got to do with anything?" he asked hotly. "Wait! I am NOT spoiled! Anyway, if I am, so are you, 'Mione. You're my sister, now, and you're spoiled just like me!"

"You're both idiots," observed Harry, chuckling softly.

That defused the silly argument between the new siblings. Hermione picked up the Animagi book and hefted it in her arms. "I really am sorry, Harry. I was being pushy, and I shouldn't have just gone on like that."

Harry was looking down and watched as the toe of his boot scraped the floor. "S'okay, 'Mione. I just didn't think this Animagus stuff was going to be so hard."

"Yeah," agreed Draco. "I mean, can you imagine your first dad and his friends brewing this potion, Harry?"

"Yeah, I..." Harry bluntly cut off his sentence, and frowned sharply. "Dad, and even Professor Lupin said my first dad wasn't really good at Potions." His eyes blinked in thought several times. "Professor Lupin said that Sirius was terrible at everything because he hated homework."

"Harry?" asked Hermione. "What are you thinking?"

Harry grinned suddenly. "They couldn't have brewed that potion!" Both Hermione and Draco were puzzled. Look," he began to explain. "Professor Lupin told me that my first dad and his friends learned to become Animagi in their fifth year!" Harry looked at his friends as if they should understand.

Hermione did slowly understand, and she began to grin. "That potion is very advanced. I mean, beyond seventh year, I'd guess."

"I don't get it," glowered Draco.

"It means, silly, that if the Marauders couldn't brew the potion for Animagus change that they must have found another way to do it!" laughed Hermione.

Draco still had a sour look on his face, along with a scowl. "No it doesn't, Hermione. Maybe that's just when they started learning. Maybe it took forever." Draco was getting tired of all their Animagus talk. He was convinced it wasn't going to happen. "I'm going to bed."

"Draco!" Harry called after his best friend. The Malfoy boy ignored him and left the little hidden room.

"Harry," Hermione stopped her friend by touching his arm. "If the Marauders did this a different way, maybe you could ask Professor Lupin?" Harry smiled, but just a bit. Hermione's mouth quirked, just a bit. "Think that would be better than taking ingredients from your dad?"

"Yeah," sighed Harry in relief. "But, 'Mione, why'd you even suggest that? Stealing, I mean."

Hermione shrugged and pulled Harry to sit down beside her on the narrow chaise lounge they had found awhile back and smuggled into their hidey-hole.

"I wasn't thinking, Harry," she admitted. The girl then looked him carefully in his green eyes. "If I tell you something, you won't tell anyone else? Not even Draco?" Harry shook his head firmly. "Or, your dad?"

Harry knew the value of secrets, and although he didn't much care to keep secrets from his father, he did think that he had enough sense to know whether or not a secret should be told to him.

"I won't tell, 'Mione," he said solemnly.

"You remember I told you how my mum wouldn't get books for me?" she asked.

"Yeah," he said. Then with a grin where his green eyes sparkled Harry added, "I thought it was really neat how you had all these great places to hide your books."

Hermione smiled, and her cheeks blushed. "Well, what I didn't tell you was that I stole a lot of those books. Mostly from the library, and a second-hand bookstore..." her blush deepened to a crimson shame, and Hermione's hands twined nervously together. "I just really wanted them, Harry. Mum wouldn't give me money for books, or anything that was really interesting, and I didn't have a choice!" Hermione glanced sideways to see if her friend was judging her in any way. Relieved that he wasn't, she continued, apologetically, "So, when we needed those ingredients, it just didn't occur to me that we shouldn't steal."

Harry leaned against Hermione's shoulder, and she let out a sigh as she leaned closer to her friend.

Draco lay in his bed, in the dark, a scowling pout upon his face. He really wanted to become an Animagus. He just knew he'd be something really neat, something fierce, maybe even a magical animal! He was upset that Harry would not get the ingredients they needed. His best friend had an annoying propensity for always being a good boy. Draco wondered, just for a bit, if Harry thought Professor Snape wasn't going to love him anymore if he broke the rules.

"I'm not perfect," Draco grumbled into his pillow as he turned on his side.

It wasn't something he would ever admit in public to anyone, since a Malfoy had a certain reputation to uphold, but Draco had broken more than his share of rules growing up, and although he always was soundly punished, his parents still loved him.

Getting in trouble is what boys did, Draco's thoughts continued. It was a right every little boy had; to mess up, to get in trouble, and then to get spanked, or yelled at, or made to stand in a corner.

A very poor decision, gleefully made, Draco scrambled from his bed, and was quickly dressed. He had slipped from the dorm before Harry had gotten to bed.

Visions of unicorns, dragons, and basilisks danced through the boy's head as he broke the wards that watched over wayward Slytherin wanderers.

Fred was seated on the left, and George was on the right side of the insensate Quirrell. Just as Snape was about to say something, his head whipped sideways, and he looked upwards toward the ceiling. He scowled angrily.

"Professor?" asked Fred.

George completed the question of concern, "Is everything all right?"

Snape's lips were pursed, but he turned his attention back to the twins. "It is well. What will you do?"

George explained, "Fred's going to look for Quirrell."

Snape frowned at George's unhelpful answer, but then Fred spoke, "George is here for backlash, Professor."

George smirked. "Gotta keep my brother safe, sir."

Snape gave them both a curt nod. He had his wand out, and began to speak in the language of the ancient runes. As soon as he began to move around the room, and touch each rune carved into the wall, Fred smiled at George, then leaned forward and laid one hand upon Quirrell's heart, the other on his forehead.

The result was immediate. Fred was thrown backwards, and out of his chair as the room rumbled ominously. George replaced his brother, his hands upon the heart, and forehead of the still comatose man. George's jaw was clenched tight, his eyes closed.

"Back. to. sleep. you. AUGH!" George shouted and was about to pull away when Fred literally threw himself across Quirrell, and shoved his hands upon his twin's head and heart. Once in contact, he pushed, and then rolled off of Quirrell.

"S'all right, professor!" gasped Fred with a grin.

Snape continued to chant his spell, but spared George a quick glance of concern. George heaved out a breath, then grinned at his teacher. "What Fred said, sir!"

The room rumbled feebly again, and Snape finished his chanting. He leaned against one wall feeling worn out. "Well?" he asked.

George had picked himself up from the floor where his twin had pushed him, and he walked over to the other side of the bed to give Fred a hand up. "Sugar?" he asked Fred, ignoring Snape.

"Sugar!" agreed Fred.

Snape pushed away from the wall. "We need tea."

Snape had escorted the twins to the more secure privacy of his quarters where they had tea. The Potions Master drank his bitter tea slowly, while Fred and George wolfed down the biscuits and both indulged in three cups of tea, overly sweetened, before either were ready to talk.

"Are you ready to tell me what happened, Mr's Weasley?" asked Snape.

George began, "Old Voldy attacked Fred."

Fred nodded, "For a weak Fiend, he still has quite a punch." Fred smirked, and took another biscuit to nibble on.

Snape frowned, "What do you mean?"

George also took another biscuit, and then explained, "Voldy's weak, Professor. I don't know if it's from the spells and wards you have down there..."

Fred finished, "Or if it's because Quirrell's been fighting him."

"That's impossible!" scoffed Snape. "They both should be in a senseless coma!"

Fred shook his head. "It's close, Professor..." Fred closed his eyes for a moment.

Snape regarded the redhead and watched as the boy's colour, returned by the tea, fluctuated. He rose to his feet, held out his wand, and began to intone a complicated Diagnostic Spell. "Your magical core is severely exhausted," the Potions Master remarked with some



surprise. "Accio Magical Energy Replenisher!" The requested potion arrived with alacrity, and Snape handed it over to Fred. "Eat a few more biscuits," he urged the both of them as Fred swallowed the potion down. "You should both sleep, as well." Their teacher began to rise to usher them out, but the twins each held up a hand, and he remained where he was.

George smiled, "We will, Professor Snape, but..."

Fred interrupted, "You had a question before, and we can answer that."

Draco realised the moment he had gotten several feet away from the Slytherin common room door that he really had no idea what he was doing. Although he was sure he could get into his Head of House's classroom, and maybe even into the classroom ingredients cabinet, there was no way to find the ingredients for the Animagus Potion there. They were far too expensive, and he doubted that with ingredients so costly, they would be allowed to be used by students.

Standing indecisively, he nearly let out a terrified screech as a hand touched his shoulder. Whirling around, he held out his wand in a steady hand at his attacker.

"Harry!" Draco shouted in some relief, and then frowned. "What are you doing here?"

"I didn't see you in our dorm, and I just had an idea that maybe you went to get those ingredients." Harry crossed his arms over his chest much like his father did and glared at the tow-headed boy.

Draco glowered, but cringed slightly at his friend's disapproval. "Well, we can't be Animaguses without those ingredients, Harry."

"None of us can brew that potion, Draco," snapped Harry.

"You're just being such a goody-goody!" shouted Draco. "Maybe you should have been a Gryffindor! I hate you!" Draco stomped away from his friend, his anger wrapped up tightly around him.

As for Harry, any annoyance he had at his friend, drained like water from a sieve at Draco's harsh words. He didn't care that he had

been compared to a Gryffindor, but he didn't want Draco to hate him. A low, deep part of him began to panic. His face became splotchy with haphazard beads of sickly colour, his palms became like ice, and he broke into an uncertain run towards Draco.

"Draco?" Harry's voice trembled, but he let out a sigh of relief as the boy stopped walking away from him. "Do you... d'you really, uhm..." The sight of Draco's scowl, a vision of derision he remembered from those days when Dudley, his cousin, would peer at him with resentment, formed a lump of cold in his stomach. "C'mon!" Grabbing Draco's hand, Harry pulled his friend, with a near frantic run, to his father's office.

"The rune wards and spells are keeping Voldy in a weakened state," George elucidated.

Fred nodded, "But he isn't asleep."

"Neither is Quirrell," added George. Then he grinned. "That's a good thing, though, Professor."

"Where your wards have weakened Voldy, they've given Quirrell strength."

Snape looked appalled at the twins. "Quirrell has been aware all this time?"

The twins nodded in unison, then Fred spoke again, "Quirrell's been fighting, Professor, but he is getting weaker."

"Were you able to tell if Quirrell invited Voldemort to become a part of him?" asked Snape of both boys.

It was Fred who replied, "He was weak, sir." Fred lowered his head as tendrils of what he had felt of the wizard had embarrassed him for the man. "He was promised things by... by Voldy when he still let his followers call him Lord Voldemort. In return..." Fred shuddered.

George glanced sympathetically at his brother, "The best way to explain what Voldy did, sir, was that he opened a door in Quirrell's mind. Should anything ever happen to Voldy, Quirrell would be a vessel for him."

"But it went wrong," said Fred.

Snape frowned, as he speculated what could have gone wrong. As far as he had been able to tell with his Legilimens, it had become torture. Had it been that way from the beginning?

George continued to explain, "Voldy didn't mean to share Quirrell's body with him, but Quirrell, knowing that something was open within him for Voldy, had been searching for ways to close it. He was looking for a solution to... er..."

Fred picked up the thought, "To close the door, Professor. He found something but it didn't didn't quite close the door."

George sighed, "It's impossible for Voldy to completely get rid of Quirrell because he's been fighting to stay alive."

After several long minutes of quiet, and a not-so-subtle yawn from George, Snape dismissed the two boys, with a note that would excuse them from their first two classes of the day should they oversleep.

Tues, Jan. 14th, 1992 - Very Early

It was just nearing almost one in the morning as Snape ushered the twins out of his quarters, and left him to consider that evening. Just as he sat down with a bit of brandy in his hand, an internal alarm alerted him to the wards on his private lab being lowered. It was then that he recalled there had been an earlier alert that one of his Snakes had slipped past his minor wards for the Slytherin common room. Someone had sneaked out, after curfew, and it seemed that same someone was now breaking into his lab.

Putting down the brandy, he Summoned his teaching robes, threw them on, and strode into his bedroom. There, behind his wardrobe, was a hidden door that led into his private lab. This was an entrance that Harry did not know of. His son did know of the door to his private lab in the office, and although that one was mostly hidden by shadow, and the stones of the wall, it wasn't a huge secret. Privileged students, including the Weasley twins, had the fortune of being invited to Snape's own lab, and had entered through the office

entrance, so that meant the Potions Master really had no idea who could be breaking into his lab.

Harry had finesse, and he could sneak about with some skill learned, unfortunately, at the feet of his relatives. It was a survival trait he would never lose, but his anger, and annoyance with Draco had thrown any caution the first year would have employed in this reckless endeavor of stealing from his father, out the window.

Draco followed swiftly behind his friend, partly because his friend wouldn't let his hand go, and partly because this dashing about like hunted hares was rather exciting.

They had easily made it into the Potions Master's office because Harry's magical signature had been keyed to those wards a long time ago. Other students would be made to wait patiently in the corridor, while Harry was easily able to walk in.

Finding the door to his father's private lab was also easy for Harry, because when he had traversed the Dursley house and yard at night, he had always done so without the benefit of light.

Normally, Harry would not have been able to break through his father's wards on this lab. Even though there were students that knew of it, and had even worked in it, Snape did not believe it was a good idea to allow anyone within unless he was there. The wards would alert Snape that someone was trying to break in, and if a breach was managed, the Potions professor would quickly know of this, too.

An unknown aspect to that final ward is that any magical person that entered would have their magic suppressed for just enough time for Snape to gain the advantage of an opponent. The only one this ward did not work upon, was Dumbledore who could wipe the ward away like an irritating cobweb. Thankfully, the Headmaster had never felt the inclination to tread upon this part of his Potions Master's world.

Neither boy was aware that their magic had been strategically suppressed. The ingredients cabinet was not locked, and as a shadow, slightly darker than the others in the room, spied the two intruders, it would be doubly warded by morning.

Harry finally let go of Draco as they stepped into the large cabinet that was more like a walk-in closet. Shelf after shelf lined the walls, and every possible inch of space, with the exception of the back of the door. The ceiling stretched high above the small boys, who craned their necks to look up at the impossible reach. A floating, wooden ladder appeared to be the only access. Even though it stretched up into the darker depths of the cabinet, neither boy was willing to use it.

"It doesn't matter, Harry," Draco whispered into the gloom. He gulped as he felt his voice being swallowed by the darkness.

"I'm not going up that ladder," Harry hissed back stubbornly.

"We'll just Summon it," smiled the other boy.

"I haven't learned that one well enough, yet," Harry replied moodily. He squinted at some of the labels, but even with a rather well-developed night vision, his father's spiky scrawl was no better to read than a foreign language in the darkened cabinet.

Draco grinned in the darkness, and held out his hand. "Accio Chameleon Skin!"

A few jars wobbled a bit, but nothing else happened. Draco glowered. Harry quipped, "See? Yours isn't any better than mine."

"It is too!" snapped Draco indignantly. "My father taught me how to Summon stuff before I even got to Hogwarts! Accio Chameleon Skin... NOW!"

With a silent Lumos, the tip of Snape's wand was lit, revealing him in the doorway of the cabinet, and illuminating his interlopers. His voice was smooth as creamed coffee, "Now what would two first year Snakes need Chameleon Skin for, I wonder?" The gaze in their professor's eyes was hard, and thundered that they were both in trouble. Instinctively, Harry and Draco moved closely together. Their eyes were wide, and Harry was looking almost as pale as his friend.

Snape moved aside so he was no longer blocking the doorway, and pointed towards the lab. "Get. Out!"

The two Slytherins scrambled to obey, skimming past their Head of House without touching him. Once in the lab, Snape turned on the two boys angrily. Harry spoke up, "Dad! We..."

"Quiet, Mr. Snape!" Harry's mouth snapped shut, and his heart felt suddenly like lead in his chest. He was in so much trouble!

"Not only are you both out after curfew, but I find you both in my private lab and attempting to steal one of my rarest ingredients!" Snape's scowl now had a fire in it. With a wave of his wand, the torches in the lab whooshed to life, chasing away the shadows. "Sit," he ordered, "before I decide to make that impossible for you both."

Harry immediately plunked his seat obediently down onto a bench with a thump. His gaze never left sight of his father. Because of that, he didn't realise that Draco was still standing.

"You can't spank me, Professor! My papa would...!"

Snape loomed like a great, predatory bird over the small boy. His nose practically brushed Draco's pert, and perfectly formed, Malfoy nose. Draco backed up two steps until the bench smacked into the backs of his knees.

"Trust me, Mr. Malfoy, for stealing from my private stores, your papa would condone any punishment I chose to deliver. Now. Sit. Down." Draco's bottom plopped down onto the bench right beside Harry.

"Please don't spank Draco, Daddy!" Harry's voice was a hoarse whisper of fear as his great, green eyes deepened in colour; the small boy clutched his hands together.

Snape reached out for his son, but pulled quickly back as Harry flinched. The older wizard cursed silently at this reminder of the abuse Harry had suffered at the hands of his relatives. The child had been so carefree of late Snape nearly forgot he still had to tread carefully around his son; especially when it came to discipline.

Before Snape could say anything, Draco leaned in towards Harry and spoke in a whisper, that the Head of their House could hear, "Spankings aren't bad, Harry." The raven-haired boy whipped his head around so he was intently looking at his friend. "Honest. I

haven't been spanked for ages, because papa says I'm too grown-up," Draco said a little haughtily.

"Doesn't it hurt?" asked Harry.

Draco nodded, "Well, yeah, but..." he leaned closer so their shoulders were touching, "but it's not a whole lot. Just kind of stings for awhile, and papa always gave me a hug afterwards."

Harry blinked, puzzled, and inquired, "Why's he hug you?"

"Well, 'cause that's the end of it all, and..."

Snape interrupted, "Because, Harry, a spanking is not a beating. It is a reminder not to do something bad, or dangerous, and you receive a hug afterwards to show that you are loved." Harry let out a slow breath of relief. His eyes were still wide, though. The professor's mien became stern as he loomed over the two boys, "I am not going to spank either of you, though." Since his son was about to question him again, in his worry, Snape declared the punishment, "You will each have detention this Saturday, and Sunday." Draco sputtered, and Snape held up his hand, "Yes, I am quite aware that your detention will interfere with Little League Quidditch practice, that is why this is a punishment."

"That stinks!" grumbled Draco.

"Would you care to make this two weekends of detention, Mr. Malfoy? Your first game is next weekend, I do believe. T'would be a shame to miss it while you are de-lunging Idle Fish."

"No, sir," Draco replied quickly, and contritely.

"Very good." Snape then leaned back against the edge of a nearby work table. "Now, why do you not let me know the reason you needed Chameleon Skin for an Animagus Reveal Potion?"

Draco and Harry stared in shocked wonder at each other. "How did you know, dad?"

"Chameleon Skin is used in that potion, and in a poison; nothing else. I shall inform you both now, if you were attempting to brew the poison, then I will paddle both of your bottoms until neither of you

can sit for a week!" Although his voice was low, the professor's dark, silken tone seemed to rumble like thunder through their bones.

"No! No!" they both chorused wildly. Harry then added, "We just wanted to know what our Animagus forms were, sir! Honest!"

Snape crossed his arms over his chest as he refrained from pinching the bridge of his nose. Patiently he said tautly, "Considering that the Animagus Reveal Potion is an Apprentice Level potion, and you are both first years with a slightly better than average brewing performance, which one of you intended to brew that potion?"

There was a variety of "Ahhh... errr... well, you... uhm... I think... ewww... ohhhh," from both boys until the professor snapped his hand up for them to stop, and be quiet.

Snape glared down his hooked nose in utter disapproval. "Let me guess," he began so staunchly, that both boys knew instantly that their professor was far from guessing. "The ambitious Miss Malfoy intended to brew this advanced potion." Harry's jaw fell open, and Draco fumed. Snape Summoned an elf.

"What may Twitsy do for Potions Master, sir?" bowed the small creature.

"Bring Miss Malfoy to me directly," he ordered.

The elf popped out. While it was gone, Snape turned away from the two errant Snakes and went to close his storage room door, and to add a new ward to it. At the sound of the elf returning, and a questioning Hermione letting out a startled squeak of surprise, he turned back to the Silver Trio.

"Miss Malfoy, your co-horts have confessed to attempting to steal quite a valuable ingredient from me. Since I know this involves the Animagus Reveal Potion, it slightly over-shadows their blatant disregard for the curfew. Can you tell me, whatever made you think you could brew this potion?"

For a moment, only Hermione's jaw worked, and then her spine stiffened, "I'm very good at Potions, sir."



Normally, such arrogance would set Snape's teeth on edge, but the girl was simply stating fact; she was very good. He had no doubt that by her fifth year she would be bored with the normal curriculum and more interested in the advanced potions. He might require an assistance in a few years.

Still, his thoughts mused, that was in a few years. For now, "You are not that good, Miss Malfoy." Hermione was about to protest, but Harry put a restraining hand on his friend's arm, as did Draco on the other side of her. "The Animagus Reveal Potion," he declared sharply, "is more than just a complicated potion to brew, it is an unstable one. It takes brewing either by a Master, or at the side of a Master, to control it. Have you any idea what could have happened if you lost control of that potion, Miss Malfoy?"

Hermione leaned back from her teacher's anger, swallowed, and shook her head. Snape swooped like an avenging predator down towards the trio, and all three pulled back in alarm. "No explosions, but toxic fumes that would have had all three of you overcome before either of you could have pulled your wands and Vanished the mess. No one would have known, for hours at least, that you were all dead."

Hermione sniffled. Harry wiped at some stubborn moisture gathering at his eyes. Draco gaped, and grabbed his sister's arm in a tight grip. At that grip, tears began falling down Hermione's cheeks.

"I'm sorry, sir!" the girl sniffled, then snuffled. Snape quickly conjured a handkerchief, and gave it to her. As discretely as possible, Hermione blew her nose into the handkerchief.

"Be that as it may," said Snape, doing his best to keep a disapproving facade upon his features. He really did not like tears, and all three looked very close to falling down into a mess of tears. "All three of you will be serving detention this weekend, in addition, I expect an essay upon the Animagus Reveal Potion and why it is no longer used in the training of an Animagi apprentice."

"But the book said...!" began Hermione in defense of herself and her friends.

Snape interrupted sharply, "And what have I told you about your precious books, Miss Malfoy?"

Hermione's shoulders drooped. "Just because I've read one book that doesn't mean my research should stop there."

"Correct. You will learn, as you work on your essay, what is wrong with the potion, why it is no longer used, and what is used instead. I would also like the three of you to find out just why Animagus training is not done on a whim by students, but with a trained professional."

Harry gulped as his father looked pointedly at him. Had he done something he should not have, that he didn't know about? His stomach felt tight, and sick.

Snape was quiet as he studied his son, and it bothered him that Harry looked ready to be ill. He dismissed the Malfoy children to their dorms with the admonishment that they were to be bright and early for breakfast, despite the late hour of the evening.

Once they left the private lab, Snape held out his hand to his son, "Harry. With me."

Harry stood obediently, and stared for a moment at his father's hand before taking it. Snape then led Harry out of the lab, and into their quarters. He then seated himself on the sofa, and pulled Harry so that the boy stood in front of him. He held Harry's small hands in both of his.

"Harry..."

Snape was suddenly interrupted by a blurred litany of, "I'm sorry! I'm sorry, Daddy! Please don't...!"

"Harry! Stop it!" chided Snape firmly before his son could voice a plea not to be hit.

Harry's mouth clamped shut. He didn't fight his father as Snape pulled him onto the sofa, and tucked him against his side. "Child," he sighed heavily. "Am I never to discipline you or your friends without causing you fear of me?"

"I'm not afraid of you," Harry whispered softly.

Snape turned slightly, then drew his son's chin up enough for him to see into eyes that had seen too much hurt for his young life. "If I had spanked Draco, would you have been angry with me?"

Harry's brows furrowed, and then he nodded. "You aren't supposed to hit us."

"As I did to Hermione when she berated me in the Great Hall?" After Hermione had become so incensed at her teacher for a creative punishment that would be meaningful for having sneaked out after curfew, and getting into the Restricted Section of the library, Hermione had gotten so angry that she had shouted at her teacher, and Head of House, in the Great Hall. Snape had reacted, justifiably, on instinct, and spanked the girl, once, in front of everyone.

"I know why you did that," Harry said sullenly, and pulled away from his father.

In that moment, Snape knew for certain that although he had explained the punishment to his son, who had nearly retreated into past memories from that scene, that Harry had not, yet, reconciled his emotions with the punishment of his friend. Truthfully, so far, Harry had been a nearly perfect little boy. His homework was always finished on time, he was respectful in class to all his teachers, and Snape had never caught the child being a nuisance at the meals, or during breaks in the corridors as the other students were wont to do.

With a lump in his chest, the Potions Master realised that Harry's good behavior had been, perhaps, too good. Contrary to what the students in the other Houses thought about Slytherin House getting away with everything, Snape was a strong disciplinarian in his House. At the end of the day, detentions would be given, scoldings meted out, or further chores within the House itself tasked to offenders. In addition, there were the weekly inspections to make sure the dorms and the common room were kept clean, and the enforcement of bedtimes.

Harry followed all of these rules, to the letter, without fail.

And, Snape, the inveterate rule maker, enforcer, had only blessed his good luck for having such an obedient son. Clearly he had missed the reason behind this near perfect, good behavior.

"Harry, are you aware that parents expect their children to misbehave?" Snape asked, somewhat awkwardly. He felt unsure about just how to delve into this subject, and so he had decided to just dive into it.

Harry gave his father a puzzled glance. He thought back to his cousin, Dudley. Dudley, the boy who was probably, in Harry's opinion, the worst behaved child on the planet. Dudley, who was absolute perfection in his parents eyes. Then, there had been Harry. Harry, the skinny boy who did all the chores without complaint, who obeyed every word of his aunt and uncle, who didn't fight back when Dudley hit him... for just because.

"Is that why parents think their kids are perfect?" Harry asked. He felt royally confused! Maybe, since he now belonged to his professor, who was now his father, he should stop acting so perfect?

Snape frowned in puzzlement at his son. There was definitely some mis-communication going on, and if he didn't clear it up, this whole situation in regards to discipline would always be a sore point between them.

"Harry, what did you think I would do for catching you and Draco stealing from me?" Snape asked carefully.

Harry stared down at the tops of his shoes, and chewed at his lower lip. "You'd be mad?" the small boy asked. He sounded very unsure of his answer, despite the presence of his punishment from his father.

"That sounds very like a guess, child. A rather accurate guess, but it does not answer my question." He picked up Harry's hand and curled it gently within his own, drawing the boy onto the sofa beside him. "Please tell me the truth?"

Harry looked up into his father's earnest, dark eyes, and sidled a bit closer to him. Staring down at his father's large, potion-stained, calloused hand, he took a deep breath. "They always told me that if I didn't do everything right, they'd send me away." Harry swallowed, and his other hand traced over his father's knuckles. "Don't you want me to do everything right? To be a good boy?" He lifted his head, and his green gaze implored Snape for something more than just a yes, or a no.

Snape tugged the boy gently to his side, keeping their gazes locked. "Whether you are getting in trouble, or failing a class, you are my good boy. You will be my good boy until all the suns in the night sky wink their last, and that, Harry, is a very, long time."

Harry smiled shyly up at his father. "So you won't ever send me away?"

Snape shook his head slowly. "Never." He then smirked with a smile, and chided, "But that doesn't give you carte blanche to act like a hooligan." A little more seriously he added, "When you do misbehave, though, son, I will discipline you."

Harry nodded, just as seriously. He then asked worriedly, "Will you ever spank me?"

"Does it worry you that I might?" inquired his father.

Harry shrugged, and he tried to tug his hand from his father's. Snape held him tightly, though, and cupped the child's cheek.

"Harry?" As the Head of Slytherin House there had been a handful of rare times that Snape had used corporal punishment on a Snake, but only on his first years, and it had never been more than a swat or two. The spankings were never intended to hurt, but to get the attention of a child that was usually hysterical with anger (as Hermione had been months earlier). His son, his fragile child, was a different matter.

"I s'pose," Harry finally said tightly, his cheeks flushing with colour.

Letting go of his son's hand he drew Harry into an embrace against his side. Harry's arm slipped across his abdomen securely as he laid his cheek against his father's chest.

"You were ill abused by your relatives, child. I think that giving you even an attention getting swat on your bum would hurt you more, here," Snape's fingers spread over his son's heart as Harry sighed at the thrum of his father's voice from his chest. "I do not ever wish to give you reason to fear me, but it is a parent's duty to properly discipline their child. You can be assured that I shall never spank you for any trouble you might get into in the future."

"Will I get grounded, or something like that?" Harry asked into his father's chest. He could feel his father nod.

"I think that would be appropriate in some situations," agreed Snape. "There could also be extra chores, restriction of activities, such as Quidditch, or during the summers, and holidays, you might not get to visit your friends."

"Am I gonna get an extra punishment for what we did since I'm also your son, Dad?" Harry suddenly asked.

"Extra?" repeated Snape, slightly confused.

"Well, I know you're probably gonna..."

Snape gently corrected Harry's grammar, "Going to, not gonna."

"Yeah, sorry. You're going to write to Mr. Malfoy about what happened, right?" Harry lifted his head so he could see his father's face.

"I am, yes. I always inform a student's parents as to any trouble above the simple back-talk, or pranks."

"Well, then I bet Draco and Hermione are going to get Howlers, or something like that. So, are you going to, maybe, send me one, too?"

Snape smirked slightly, and his eyes glimmered with amusement, as he now understood his son's question about additional punishment; Harry wanted to know if Snape was going to do what other parents would do. "I do not think I shall send a Howler, but I do believe I ought to do something to impress upon you the cost behind Chameleon Skin."

"What would that be?" asked Harry, a little worry creeping into his voice.

"Hmmm," Snape mused, a small smile tugging at his lips as he pretended to give grave consideration to the question. He then began, "Well, since I began you upon an allowance just before Christmas, I believe it might be providential to have you do extra

chores around here to earn an addition to your allowance so that you might save up an amount equal to the cost of the Chameleon Skin."

"I could do that!" perked up Harry. He then jumped to his feet. "When do I start?"

Snape rose to his feet with a small chuckle. "I think you should go to bed first, Harry. It is very late."

Harry hugged his father, and then walked with him to the Slytherin common room, and his dorm.

A/N: This chapter would have been much longer, but I suppose it is quite long enough. I have been writing in woefully sporadic spurts since our beloved furry kid, Panda, a mixed border collie, took suddenly ill about three weeks ago. On Feb. 14 we learned that her poor body was riddled with cancer, and there was nothing to be done for her. We had to have her put to sleep that evening. I really needed to finish this off with something just between Snape and Harry, and so this last is what I wrote. I hope it's not too choppy or anything.

Tues. Jan. 14th, 1992

Snape yawned. He then glowered forbiddingly in case anyone at the breakfast table had seen that tiny weakness. Everyone at the staff table were busy with their morning repast, and the students below them at their tables were a pleasant hum of yawns, morning chatter, and the sounds of enjoying breakfast.

Picking up his coffee and sipping at the bitter, heated brew, he looked down at his table of Slytherins. Before slipping off to his bed last night he had taken care of a letter to Lucius to inform him of his children's transgressions of that night. Since the mail had not arrived, Snape was curious to see if the owls would be bringing in two Howlers to go along with breakfast.

For the moment it appeared that the Silver Trio were a bit out of sorts. Hermione was ignoring her brother, and Draco did not seem inclined to speak to Harry. Harry, far from being injured by the rebuff, seemed quite content to ignore Draco, as well. Snape decided he would give the tempers the day to heal before he would deign to intervene.

Just as another yawn, reminding him of how little sleep the older wizard had collected last night, tried to escape and embarrass him, Snape clamped down upon it, and finished the last of his coffee. He then left the Great Hall before anyone could offer any pleasantries for the day.

There were no Howlers in the day's mail for the Malfoy children, and although Hermione still worried about hearing from her new parents, Draco seemed content to think that, other than his Head of House's ire, he had gotten off scot free.

As the Great Hall was emptying well fed students to their classrooms, the Silver Trio, still silent, also left and were preparing to turn towards their first class of the day when an ebony black cane with the silver head of a fearsome snake shot down as though from nowhere across the three of them. All three children looked up into the equally fearsome face of the cane's owner, Lucius Malfoy.

Lucius ignored his two first years, turning his attention to the dark haired child. "Harry, since I am certain your father has already dealt with you, I shan't delay your progress to classes." He moved his



cane just enough to let Harry, on the end of the trio, go. Harry glanced back at his friends. Hermione nodded at him, and Draco swallowed sickly. Harry then ran off towards Charms.

While Snape prepared the classroom for the first class of the day, there came a polite knock on the doorframe of the door. Without looking up from the chalk board where he was double-checking the recipe written there, he ordered, "Come in, Lupin."

Remus smiled sadly and shook his head as he loped in. "By your use of my last name, I am guessing that I am in trouble, Severus."

"Indeed," drawled Snape. He then turned to the left, and glared at the Deputy Headmaster. "You told Harry about his father and Black being Animagi." Snape crossed his arms over his chest as the stick of chalk floated impatiently at his elbow.

Remus' smile faded abruptly. "What did he do?"

"You know of the detention he and his friends received for breaking curfew, and for violating my private lab," Snape stated. "What I did not add into my report to you was that they planned to steal Chameleon Skin for an Animagus Reveal Potion." The Deputy Headmaster's eyes widened. The Potions Master glowered tautly, "I asked you to use discretion in telling Harry tales, Lupin. He is an impressionable, little boy."

Remus nodded, leaning his shoulder against the wall. "When I told him about their Animagi, Severus, I had made it clear that it was exceptional magic that they were working with."

Snape frowned at the Deputy Headmaster. "Harry is fascinated by tales about James, Lupin. Did it never cross your mind that he might wish to be an Animagus simply because James was one?" Snape's voice was a condescending razor.

Remus glanced down at his feet. "I confess it did not, Severus. I had thought my warning was enough, but I see now it wasn't."

Snape waved at the impatient piece of chalk and it sailed over to the chalkboard to finish writing up the day's potion. He then went to his desk to make a few notations in his class journal.

After several seconds of quiet, Remus asked, "Stealing, Severus. Harry's been rather a good boy this year. Why, all of a sudden, would he try to steal something from you that he could possibly have asked you for?"

"They knew what they were doing was wrong," Snape replied simply. He then glanced up at the other wizard. "That and it seems Harry had been behaving so well because he feared that if he caused trouble I would not care for him anymore."

"That's ridiculous!" scoffed Remus.

"Of course it is, but Harry was raised by a dysfunctional family who continually confused him as to what was normal behaviors for a child his age." Snape leaned his hip against his desk. "Harry is a survivor, Remus. He watches people for clues on how he should act around them, and to learn from their body language if they mean him harm. He is rather good at blending in with a crowd so as to draw as little attention to himself as possible." Snape smirked. "He is curious, though, and I carefully curbed a tendency to sneak about, which could get him into an infinite amount of trouble. Trouble that Dumbledore would not hesitate to foster."

"Oh yes. James' cloak," Remus shook his head with a sigh. He really had had to agree with the Potions Master in not allowing Harry to even know of its existence, yet. James had been enough of a nuisance with the cloak as a kid. Harry wouldn't use the Invisibility Cloak for nefarious pranks, and sneaking around, but if he took it upon himself to hide, for any reason, Snape, and other adults, would be hard pressed to find him. Remus then asked, "So then, why the stealing? Why now?"

Again Snape's fingertip tapped his upper lip. "I am afraid that is an aspect I overlooked last night." A sudden, jaw-cracking yawn gave Remus the reason for Snape's usual attentiveness to have faltered. Snape glowered at the other wizard's silent chuckle. "Wait until you have begun raising your own pup, Lupin, and then show me how much sleep you manage!"

The werewolf chuckled, "I am sorry, Severus, but honestly, I don't think I've ever seen you yawn, much less admit to any failings we mere mortals possess." He bowed superciliously.

"I have a class arriving in five minutes," huffed Snape, "and unless you would like to be our test subject, you ought to leave."

Remus did leave, and as Snape finished his preparations for his first class of the day, his thoughts strayed to his son. Harry had been suitably repentant in regards to his behavior last night, but it certainly did not explain why he had done what he had done. The boy had sneaked into his private lab, when Snape knew Harry was much more stealthy than that. Quite frankly, if Harry had truly wanted the Chameleon Skin without his father's knowledge, he was a bit more canny than many expected. Snape had no doubt that he would have discovered the ingredient missing weeks ago, with, possibly, no clue as to who had taken it!

Lucius glared down at his two children; Hermione recently adopted out of the clutches of Muggle parents who were both neglectful, and dubious in their methods of interacting with their only child. It rankled knowing that Mrs. Granger was yet unrepentant, and Mr. Granger, free from prison, seemed blithely free of both his wife, and his child.

Taking a Muggleborn child into his home would have meant a death sentence not just from the Dark Lord, but from his father, too. Abraxas Malfoy, such a prejudiced, and staunch supporter of Lord Voldemort, would have thought nothing of hurting Hermione. It would not matter to the dead patriarch that Lucius had quickly fallen for the sweet, and intelligent girl. He could not love her more if she had been his own!

Thus, he took very seriously the infractions Snape had informed him of. He had not hesitated in leaving the manor that morning, upon receipt of the professor's letter, to deal with his children.

"Draco, you broke curfew, in order to steal a very expensive ingredient from Professor Snape's private lab," Lucius voice was perfunctory. Anyone hearing it would know it was best not to interrupt him. "Hermione, you are culpable because you intended to brew the Animagus potion. Without having thoroughly researched it."

"I could have brewed it," Hermione insisted. Draco let out a groan at his sister's unwise infraction.

Lucius' left eyebrow rose a fraction, smoothly. "Indeed? I've seen your grades in Potions, my girl, and although impressive, they hardly put you in the league of a Master at Potions." He began tapping the snake head of his cane rhythmically upon the desk in front of them.

Draco had stopped looking at his father, and kept his eyes on the cane. When he had been little, the tapping of the cane foretold of a meeting over his father's knee. The young eleven year old's eyes widened. Hadn't his father said he was too old for spankings?

"But, sir...!" Hermione clamped her mouth shut as her father's relaxed mien suddenly became like the warning grey of a Summer storm. She finally realised that she was quite a bit in trouble.

Minutes later, just before a bell announced the first class of the day, Lucius left the empty classroom with his son and daughter walking ahead of him. Both were doing their best to wipe surreptitiously at tears that reddened their eyes and caused nearly silent sniffles.

With a tap of his wand over the heads of the two children, a new door opened, revealing the interior of the Charms classroom. Flitwick smiled, and nodded to the aristocratic elder Malfoy.

"My apologies, Professor Flitwick," said Lucius with infinite grace in his voice. "I needed to speak to my children before class today. I hope they are not too late."

"Not at all, Mr. Malfoy!" the diminutive professor piped up. He watched as Draco and Hermione made their way to their friend, Harry. He stifled a smirk as each child sat upon the hard bench with care.

Lucius gave a nod, then a warning glare at Draco and Hermione, and for good measure, one at Harry, and then left the room silently. Titters from both Gryffindors and Slytherins flitted through the room. With a tap of his foot, the professor brought order back to the class, and began the lesson of the day.

"What happened?" whispered Harry to Draco.

Draco whispered mournfully back, "I'm sorry, Harry. For last night."

"Me too, Harry," whispered Hermione. She shifted uncomfortably on the bench.

Harry glanced worriedly at his friends who were each looking rather uncomfortable seated on the wooden bench on either side of him. "Did your dad...?" Harry asked, not knowing if he should be appalled at what punishment he guessed his friends had received. He never wanted his father to ever spank anyone, but Draco had explained at breakfast that morning that Lucius had used to spank Draco; a lot. Hermione had seemed a little worried at that thought, but Draco had reassured his sister that their father wasn't mean.

After several minutes, Harry decided that although his friends were not happy with the spanking they had so obviously received, all parents were different. He did have to make certain of one thing, though, and he hissed quietly to Draco, "Did your dad hug you?" Harry glanced to see if Hermione had heard the question. She simply smiled, and nodded, so she had heard. It heartened him that the girl wasn't angry, either.

Draco replied softly, "Yeah, Papa hugged us." He jostled Harry's elbow playfully. "Still loves us, even if we were sort of stupid."

Harry smiled at that, very much relieved.

"Misters Snape and Malfoy!" called out Professor Flitwick. "If you would pay attention, please?" And that was the end of it.

At the noon break for lunch that day, Snape forwent lunch and walked with Lucius down beneath the known dungeons towards Quirrell's cell. As they walked, they ignored the matter of the possessed man, and Snape inquired about Hermione and Draco.

"They were both rather fidgety in Potions," smirked Snape wryly.

"Indeed they should have been," nodded Lucius. "I will not tolerate a son of mine who thinks it is all right to steal, or a daughter who argues with her father." Both men were quiet for a moment as they both descended the spiral staircase into the depths of the Dungeon under the Dungeons. Leaning against the wall at the bottom to catch his breath, and to quell the dizziness, Lucius added, "As I spoke further with my children, Severus, I discovered that Harry had

wished to stop their work on the Animagus study some time before the Christmas holidays."

"Was that the moment they decided they needed to commit a bit of robbery?" asked Snape.

"So it appears," confirmed Lucius. "Harry was interested in the study, but he kept resisting the apparent need to steal the Chameleon Skin."

Snape's eyebrow rose exponentially with his concern. He had not realised that Hermione and Draco had coerced his son into his actions of that night. Lucius nodded sharply as the Potions Master understood just what Hermione and Draco had done to their best friend.

"Were they aware of what they did?" asked Snape.

"As children, I believe they were acting impulsively about the whole thing. Eventually I will forgive them for the notion of stealing," Lucius intoned magnanimously with a smug glance of Aristocratic superciliousness. "However, I did scold them both for having taken advantage of young Harry's worry of losing them as friends if he did not comply."

"That scolding did not sit well, I expect," replied Snape with a frown, despite the humourous pun of his observance.

It was Lucius who chuckled slightly, and then nodded, "Indeed, it did not, Severus. Both of them were rightfully horrified when they realised just what they had done to Harry in their dogged pursuit of becoming Animagi."

Both wizards now stood just outside of Quirrell's' cell. Lucius had one last thing to say before addressing the problem before them. "Harry will be fine, Severus. It will take time, and patience, but he will be fine."

Snape's only reply was a curt nod of acknowledgment, and then they entered the cell.

As the elegant, and dignified Lucius Malfoy threw up in a conjured bucket just outside of Quirrell's cell in the Dungeon under the

Dungeons, Snape held back the man's pale, satin-like hair. When it appeared there was nothing left in the older wizard's stomach beyond bile, Snape Vanished the bucket and its mess, and helped Lucius to his feet, and to sit upon the nearby bench nestled in a curved alcove.

Lucius' pale skin was grey, and slightly blotchy as he closed his eyes against the waning dizziness.

"I thought I'd seen every abomination Voldemort could perpetrate!" gasped Lucius as he clutched his belly. "Merlin! That face on the back of his head... what is that smell?"

Snape then handed the patrician a cool cloth. He sat beside his friend, and watched as Lucius mopped at his face. At Lucius' request Snape had shown the wizard the ravaged interior of Quirrell's mind. That, and the visage of Voldemort's face on the back of Quirrell's head even had Snape's own stomach wanting to rebel, and he was glad he had not had a thing to eat since coffee that morning at breakfast. "Putrefaction," he whispered as he leaned back on the bench allowing his back to rest against the moist chill of the stones of the dungeon. He closed his eyes, and regretted doing so as the images of the Defense Against the Dark Arts teacher's mind flooded the surface of his own mind.

Upon entering the quiescent Quirrell's cell, Snape had explained to Lucius what the twins had told him about how their rune spells were not keeping Quirrell and the Fiend comatose, but they were giving Quirrell just enough strength to keep the evil creature's spirit suppressed.

"Are you certain you want to see what's in there, Lucius?" asked Snape.

"Of course I don't," snapped Lucius with a bit of nerves. He had been Legilimensed many times by the Dark Lord and it had been, to say the least, a thoroughly unpleasant experience. Lucius could truthfully claim that a Cruciatus Curse was easier to deal with than having that cruel Voldemort in your mind. "Unfortunately, if I'm going to work the right runic spells, I need some idea of what we're up against. So, let's just get this over with, Severus!"

Lucius had never been in another's mind except through memories in a Pensieve. Not only was it disturbing when he felt his own mind drawn into Quirrell's alongside Snape, he was immediately assaulted by bloodied, and tortured images of the inside of Quirrell's mind. He was only too glad that the Fiend could not be sensed, but what there was left of the stuttering teacher was both desperation, and terror. A surge of his indulgent breakfast early that morning had forced them both out of the wizard's mind. His eyes blinking with shock, Lucius looked down at Quirrell, and was further shocked by the face of Voldemort, eyes closed, but there. With a distinct lack of Malfoy dignity, the older wizard had stumbled from the room.

Snape removed a phial of Anti-Nausea Potion from his robes, and handed it over to his friend. He was breathing, slowly, and deeply through his nose to quell his mild nausea.

"What do you think, Lucius. Will we be able to help Quirrell at all?" asked Snape as he watched Lucius down the helpful potion.

"I've been only taking into consideration the man's mind, Severus," Lucius said as he also leaned his head back against the cool stone. "You gave me no warning about that thing on the back of his head. Has Madame Pomfrey seen it?"

"Yes. For a woman with such a staunch constitution as hers, I was not prepared for when she succumbed to a fit of the vapors at seeing it." Lucius smiled a bit wanly at the idea of the medi-witch fainting. Snape had probably been quite gentlemanly towards the lady. "Poppy fashioned a Healing Spell to slow the decay, but she cannot stop it entirely. If we do not use the Hourglass of Anubis soon, we shall lose Quirrell entirely."

Lucius straightened and glanced to the side at the darkened entrance of the cell. "Are either of those twins proficient in Runes?" the patrician seemed to ask out of the blue.

"Minerva told me that they both expressed an interest in Ancient Runes, but I do not believe either are taking the class. Endora Babbling tends to have a fit at just the mere mention of the two." Snape smirked at the thought of the little, grey-haired witch that taught Ancient Runes. She was nearly as dotty as Sybil Trelawney was, but in a more endearing manner. "Why do you ask?"



"We're going to be Summoning a god, Severus," Lucius began a bit testily. "Even though the Hourglass will focus Anubis' attention on Quirrell, you, myself, and anyone else in that cell will be vulnerable. I'm going to need to put up, and inscribe more runes than what we're using to keep Voldemort in check. I almost wish..."

"Not Dumbledore!" snapped the younger man, standing abruptly. "If the Headmaster even suspected I had Quirrell down here, do you have any idea the trouble I would be in?"

"You must admit, though, Severus that Dumbledore is much better at the more obscure magics than I am," protested Lucius.

"I will admit nothing of the sort, Lucius!" Snape suddenly shouted. "Bloody Merlin! I have not made it a secret of Dumbledore's machinations last year, my friend. He is allowing himself to be controlled by that damned Prophecy, and he intends for my son to be some sort of sacrifice for the wizarding world. I will not let that happen. I will destroy Voldemort, for good, and Dumbledore will not even know of it."

"Yes, yes, I've heard of all of that," Lucius said testily.

"Lucius, I believe you are merely uncertain of your skills," Snape's voice became suddenly placating. "Your Rune Magic is more trustworthy than anything Dumbledore might bring."

"Anubis, Severus," Lucius sighed.

Snape glared at the older man, refusing to mollycoddle him further. "It was you that told me about the Hourglass of Anubis, and it was you that donated a whole new wing to a museum you yourself have never visited in order to acquire it. Do not dare to tell me now that you are having doubts." Leaning over, he grasped the patrician by the upper arm and hauled him to his feet. "You can work on your calculations in my rooms," said Snape leading Lucius away from Quirrell's cell. "I have no doubts that the twins will be quite able in assisting you, so I will fetch them from class."

Lucius smirked at his friend, "You have such a persuasive personality, my friend."

Snape scowled as he strode ahead of Lucius. "Shut up, Lucy!" he snarled.

Lucius simply chuckled.

Tuesday, Jan. 14th, End of the Day

Harry was bent over his desk in his father's quarters in a fair imitation of Snape at his correspondence. Harry had come for dinner, and had remained for the peace his father's quarters afforded him for homework. As for Snape, he was looking through the sheaf of runic calculations that Lucius had left for him. The Potions Master was rather surprised to discover that the Twins were more versed in Rune Magic than he had expected. Their scribbling, identical to each other's, was right alongside Lucius. In some places they had even presumed to make corrections. Corrections that Lucius accepted into the final formula for each ward and spell.

Putting down the papers, Snape realised that Quirrell's cell was going to be filled with inscribed runes. Three times what was already there. It worried him. There was going to be a great deal of magic cast, and Dumbledore, far from incompetent, would know of it. If, indeed, the Headmaster were in some way connected to the castle itself, Hogwarts might send Dumbledore down to the Dungeon beneath the Dungeons, and that could tip over everything.

Rubbing the heel of his hand against his forehead, Snape rolled up the calculations, rose from his chair, and put them away in his desk. Walking over to his bookshelf, he retrieved a book. On his way back to his chair, he stopped beside his son. Glancing down at the boy's work, he saw that the essay was for Transfiguration.

Snape placed his hand on Harry's shoulder. "Enough of that tonight, Harry." As the boy looked up curiously at his father, he showed the book in his hand to his son.

"The Jungle Book, dad?" Harry frowned. His father's eyes looked very tired. "You okay?"

"I am fine, Harry," Snape spoke softly. "Would you mind if we just read together until bedtime?"

Harry nodded, smiled, and clambered up onto his father's lap. Snape let out an oof as his slim frame noticed that his son was finally putting on some weight. Slipping an arm around his son's waist, they both shifted so Harry slipped to his father's side, and was leaning into it. They were both now firmly ensconced, and comfortable as Snape flipped the book open with one hand. He began to read, his voice sonorous, and thrumming against Harry like distant tribal drums:

Now Rann the Kite brings home the night  
That Mang the Bat sets free—  
The herds are shut in byre and hut  
For loosed till dawn are we.  
This is the hour of pride and power,  
Talon and tush and claw.  
Oh, hear the call!—Good hunting all  
That keep the Jungle Law!

Saturday, Jan. 18th, 1992

It wasn't until the evening that Quirrell could finally be taken care of. In the morning Snape had monitored Lucius, Fred, and George Weasley as they inscribed, and incanted their runic spells. The walls, the ceiling, and even Quirrell himself were covered with runes. Wards were to keep the Fiend trapped in the cell in case Anubis did not show up. There were spells of protection that were to divert the god's attention from all but the comatose body on the bed. Minor charms were in place to keep Quirrell still, and to help Madame Pomfrey monitor the man's vital signs.

In the afternoon, Lucius, and the twins ate a lunch that would put an army on foot to shame, and then they all fell asleep, sprawled all over Snape's furniture in his private quarters.

Snape did not sleep, but watched over his already exhausted guests as they slept deeply. It was then that his Floo flared a tell-tale green. With a grimace he put down the book he was reading, turned swiftly to cast his strongest Disillusionment Spells on the three sleepers, and a subtle Muffliato that would keep them from waking at the arrival of his guest.

"Severus," smiled the Headmaster as he stepped into his Potions Master's quarters. His eyes twinkled as he felt the addition of spells

meant to hide, and to silence. He gave no indication to the stern wizard before him that he suspected the scene in the living room was more than what he saw.

"Headmaster," Snape inclined his head in a gesture of respect he did not feel. All that morning he had the dreaded feeling that Dumbledore would be roused just by the wards they were setting, and the spells cast.

Dumbledore conjured his favourite chair before the fireplace, and Snape noted that the older wizard had deftly avoided sitting on either of the twins which had collapsed on his sofa, or Lucius who had fallen asleep in the chair that matched Snape's and was just to the Headmaster's right. With a shadowed scowl, Snape seated himself in his chair, his spine ramrod straight.

There was an awkward silence between the two men before Snape finally pushed matters. "Did you have a reason for this visit, Headmaster?"

Dumbledore smiled sadly causing Snape's features to pinch in irritation. "We have parted ways, it seems, Severus, and I find it disheartening."

"Parted ways, Headmaster? My first priority is Harry," he exclaimed under his breath. "Is he not your priority, as well?"

"Of course he is, my boy. I have always thought of Harry's regard, but it appears to me that what I consider best for him, is not what you consider best." Dumbledore sighed, glancing pointedly to his right.

"What I consider best for my son, Albus, is for him to grow up in a nurturing atmosphere where he is not going to be turned into a martyr for the cause," replied Snape stiffly, but with calm aplomb.

"And you wish to discount the Prophecy," declared the Headmaster gently.

"That Prophecy killed Lily and James!" spat Snape.

"It is a pity you didn't consider the consequences when you delivered it to Voldemort, my boy," stabbed the older wizard.

Snape shot to his feet, looming angrily over the Headmaster. "You have no right to raise up my sins before me as if you are my judge, old man! I know what I did, and I have confessed as much. Unlike you, though, I am doing everything I can to fix that mistake."

"Calm yourself, Severus," chided Dumbledore. He waited until Snape grudgingly re-seated himself, his lips thinned in anger. "Do you truly believe it in Harry's best interest to fight his battles for him?"

Snape's wand slid into his hand with a nervous twitch of his wrist. He gripped it tightly, but kept himself from raising it to the more powerful wizard who remained seated, a placid, righteous Buddha, who would smile serenely while everyone drowned at his benevolent behest. The vision so inflamed the Potions Master that he had to get back to his feet and stride away from the Headmaster on the far side of his living room.

Dumbledore rose to his feet, slowly, as if feeling his age. A wave of his hand banished the chair. He walked towards Snape, and to the Potions Master surprise, the older man laid the palm of his hand to the younger man's heart. Snape stiffened, and clutched his wand tighter.

"I have been aware of the magic being cast deep within the castle all this morning, Severus," his hand lightly patted the younger man's chest, before raising his gaze. There was no sign of the inimical twinkle. "I did not stop you because Hogwarts herself sensed the good in the ancient magic." He smiled then, and his hand stopped its movement. Snape was sure his heart was stopping as well. "Even if I wished to, I think Hogwarts would not let me interfere."

Before Snape could draw in the lightest of slow, relaxed breaths, Dumbledore touched his cheek with the dry, palm of his hand. There was still no twinkle, but now there was a hardness, a flicker of the older wizard's power that anyone rarely saw. Snape felt his spine turn to ice with a growing dread. "Your efforts must succeed, my boy," the threat, whatever it might have been was unspoken, but Snape knew that Dumbledore would be able to exact a terrible price at the younger wizard's failure.

The Headmaster moved away from Snape, and back towards the fireplace. With a slight twinkle to his eye, he looked to the chair where the invisible form of Lucius Malfoy still slept heavily. "Lucius always was quite remarkable with Rune Magic." With a chuckle, Dumbledore was quickly gone into the green flames of the Floo.

Snape remained frozen in place for several long seconds. A firm hand upon his shoulder brought him out of his stupor. Lucius, who had awakened when the Headmaster left through the Floo had ended the Disillusionment Spell, and the Silencing Spell. He had tried to get his friend's attention, but the younger man seemed rooted to the spot. Finally he laid his hand heavily upon Snape's shoulder. He was about to say the Potions Master's name a third time when Snape turned sharply, his blackened orbs burning with shock.

"He knows," Snape blurted.

"Who knows what, Severus?" asked Lucius with short patience.

"Dumbledore. He knows what we are doing." Snape focused his gaze upon the older wizard's hard grey eyes. "The Headmaster felt the magic. He is not happy, but it appears that Hogwarts favours our actions, and will prevent Dumbledore from interfering." With a weary sigh he dropped into his chair, and stared angrily at the benign, orange flames in the fireplace.

Lucius left eyebrow rose, and he crossed his arms loosely over his chest. "Ah. So then it is a good time to brood over the vagaries of a sherbet lemon addled Headmaster." Fred and George had awakened, and were watching the two wizards with curiosity.

"Your sarcasm is most annoying, Lucius," muttered Snape.

"Will it remove you from that chair?" asked Lucius with a crooked smile that was part amused smirk.

Snape did rise from his chair, and shot the older man a look of dark annoyance. "Let us finish this, then."

Snape led the way out of his quarters, and soon the quartet were down beneath the dungeons, ready to do battle.

It was Saturday afternoon. The homework was nearly finished, and the twins had gone missing.

Neville Longbottom, spending the afternoon with his Slytherin friends, had explained before lunch that the twins had cheerily said goodbye to everyone in Gryffindor that morning hinting at 'plans for the Little League Quidditch'.

Hermione had taken charge of their homework session that morning, and had kept herself, Draco, Harry, and Neville busy until lunch. After lunch, no one wanted to go back to work. Neville had left to go read an adventure book, and Harry and Draco wanted to explore the castle since it was raining outside and had pushed nearly everyone inside. Hermione tried to push more study on the boys, but the boys were adamant about exploring and so the girl finally gave in, and they explored the castle.

Half of the way through their exploration found them high up in the castle in one of the many attics. The attics themselves were a labyrinth populated by helpful portraits that watched over the children as they played.

One attic had been haphazardly crammed with beautiful robes, dresses, uniforms, and more that spilled from a variety of wardrobes. The many fabrics from a time in the Wizarding world gone by occupied the four for an hour. They dressed up as kings, and queen, and when they tired of that, they trooped en masse to another room.

The next room was filled with hundreds of bottles, and jars, cabinets, and phials.

"This looks like stuff dad could use," commented Harry as he lifted one bottle that had a long, skinny neck, and a fat bowl.

Draco was examining what appeared to be a variety of Stirrers. "I wonder if Professor Snape knows about this stuff." He held up a long, copper Stirrer, and brandished it like a sword.

Harry's attention was caught by an array of blue glass that glittered against a rain-streaked window pane. "We should tell dad," he remarked. "It looks like everything is empty."

"Where's Hermione?" asked Draco as he stopped brandishing his Stirrer, and craned his head about his surroundings. "'Mione?" he called. There was no answer. He dropped the Stirrer, and stepped towards an ornate, red lacquer cabinet.

"'Mione! Where did you go?" asked Harry with a throaty shout.

Hermione's head popped up near the back of the attic room. Her brown eyes shown brightly. "There are Potions journals back here!" Just as quickly as her head appeared, so it vanished.

Harry giggled. Draco shook his head, "Leave it to 'Mione to find the books!" exclaimed Draco.

A sudden clap of what felt like localised thunder startled the children, including Hermione near the back of the room with a shelf of journals. After the initial clap of noise, there was a concert of babble before Harry's voice got all of them to look where he was pointing.

"It's a red bird!" he declared.

Hermione had left the journals and was now beside her brother. "That's a phoenix!" she breathed.

"Those are really rare," said Draco.

"Why is it here?" asked Harry.

"Ah! There you are, Fawkes." The Silver Trio turned their gazes from the phoenix to their Headmaster who now stood in the doorway they had entered. He smiled benignly at them, his eyes twinkling with relief. The old man's eyes tried to capture Harry's, but he ducked his head as he took a step back. "Harry, my dear boy. We have been looking for you this morning."

"We finished our homework, Headmaster," asserted Draco stepping protectively beside Harry.

"Almost, sir," amended Hermione. Draco gave his sister a dirty look.

"Who was looking for me, sir?" asked Harry cautiously.



Dumbledore continued to smile, but the twinkle in his eyes dimmed, as he lied, "Your father, initially. After Severus came to me, I thought it best to send Fawkes, as he is good at finding lost students."

"But we're not lost, Professor Dumbledore," interrupted Draco. He was shocked by the quick glare the Headmaster aimed at him, before turning his attention back to Harry.

Harry was shaking his head at that moment, and blinking his eyes. He knew he had done well in not looking directly into the Headmaster's eyes, but he still felt that he had been drawn in by the older wizard as he spoke. He looked up just as Dumbledore resumed his carefully crafted words, "As I was saying, Harry, your father came to me for help in looking for you this afternoon. I am certain it is nothing earth-shattering, but Severus would like for you to meet with him down in the dungeons." Dumbledore smiled brightly, as the magic of his coercive voice wrapped around each of the students, thoroughly enmeshing them within its spell.

"Uhhhm, all right," agreed Harry slowly. "How do I know where my dad is, sir?"

The Headmaster turned his attention to Hermione. He smiled beguilingly. "Miss Granger, do you have that remarkable stone that you found some time ago with you?"

Hermione's hand swiftly clutched possessively at the Stone she always carried in her pocket. "How did you know...?"

"It's quite all right, dear girl," the Headmaster chuckled. "I saw you looking at it just recently in one of the corridors. I think if you look at it now, you'll find that it will lead you right to your professor."

Hermione clutched her pocket again, but then brought out the Stone. It had become a very pale, nearly translucent pink shot through with flecks of black. It was also singing. The girl smiled.

Harry, and Draco were mesmerised by the Stone, for they heard its faint song, too. None of the children acknowledged the Headmaster as they followed Hermione, and made their way down to the dungeons.

There was no set ritual to send the Fiend, Voldemort, to Anubis, the god of Death and Judgement. Yet, like a well crafted potion, Fred and George settled on either side of Quirrell's bed, on either side of the still insensate wizard.

Fred immediately sensed Quirrell's magic and sought out the wizard himself. He soon smiled, if wanly, triumphantly that Quirrell's self had a steady hold on the younger wizard.

George did not touch the darkness that was the Fiend, but he was aware of the malevolent energy. It was flitting nervously about like a cat whose tail had been trod upon. Shadows were settling under the boy's eyes, and Snape cast a worried glance at Lucius.

Lucius did not spare his friend, or the boys a glance. He was mumbling the spells to the wards to keep them strong. Should Anubis, if he appeared, refuse the Fiend, it would be Lucius' runic magic that would hopefully keep the spirit in place.

Madame Pomfrey was in a corner of the cell. In front of her were the colourful diagnostic graphs that monitored the Weasley twins, and Professor Quirrell.

Snape stood at the foot of Quirrell's bed with the Hourglass of Anubis hovering in front of him. Beneath his breath he was chanting the ancient Egyptian words that would call forth Anubis from his Realm of the Dead to judge a wayward soul.

Madame Pomfrey glanced up from her spells as the air in the cell suddenly changed. It became heavier, as though laced with the dust of the ages. The oppressive incense of resin tickled her nose, and she stifled a sneeze so she would not disturb the wizards.

A breeze, hot, and cloying swept into the cell. Lucius stumbled in his chanting as all the runes in the room lifted from the walls, and from Quirrell. They spun lazily over Quirrell, changing from recognisable runes to the more ancient hieroglyphics. The hieroglyphics then settled, gently, upon the walls, and the comatose wizard. Lucius did not know if he should continue his chanting, and he was worried for Snape, and the twins. Just as he thought he ought to start, a distant chorus of voices, chanting in a long, dead language, filled the small cell.

The older wizard started as he felt a hand grip his. He breathed a sudden sigh of relief when he saw that it was Madame Pomfrey who held his hand. She whispered very softly into his ear, "I have a sense that you must sit with me, Lucius."

He nodded, and followed the medi-witch back to her corner.

Snape had not broken his recitation over the Hourglass of Anubis, and as far as Lucius and Poppy could tell, he was not aware of the changes in the cell. The warm breeze continued to skirl around the room, and Lucius had to remove his pale blue frock coat to ease the warmth he felt.

Then, several things happened at once.

The Fiend, the frightening apparition that was all that was left of Voldemort practically exploded from Quirrell's body. George fell backwards onto the floor in a dead faint, and Fred wavered sickeningly, but 'held' onto Quirrell's spirit.

Poppy screamed as the walls of the cell seemed to explode outward leaving them all in a much larger, more ancient chamber with colourful Egyptian bas-relief on the walls, and thick, round columns holding up the ceiling.

Snape's recitation of Egyptian words was abruptly cut off as the Fiend attacked him, wrapping around the Potions Master like a ghostly serpent.

Lucius was just leaping up to aid the younger wizard, when three children, wide-eyed, frightened, entered the strange, old chamber through the cell door.

Harry lunged for his father, and was violently thrown into one of the columns, where he struck the back of his head, and slid to the floor, boneless, and unconscious. Snape tried to call out to his son, but the Fiend was wrapping itself tighter about his throat, strangling any attempt he made to shout, or to breathe.

"DRACO! HERMIONE!" Lucius shouted to his children. "GET BACK!"

The odd wind chose that moment to whip up in the chamber, bringing with it desert sand, and dust that nearly obscured everything. Worst of all, though, was that it prevented Lucius from reaching his children, and Poppy from moving from her corner.

To Lucius' horror, Hermione stepped towards Voldemort holding forth a blood red stone. Her eyes were wide with terror, and her lips were trembling.

The Fiend coiled away from Snape where he dropped, breathing throatily, upraised on his side by his elbow. Somehow, Poppy had managed to crawl away from her corner, and was practically on her stomach approaching Snape.

"Harry!" he gasped through a painful throat.

All thought ended with Hermione's high-pitched scream as the Fiend descended upon her. An appendage, somewhat like a hand, separated from the snake-like body, and snatched triumphantly at the stone. As Voldemort held the red stone up like a trophy, the coils of its ghostly body were squeezing Hermione painfully. Draco shouted something at the Fiend, and he, too was thrown against a far wall, yet near his father.

Lucius, braced against the turmoil of the supernatural wind, crawled to his fallen son. Draco was not unconscious, and upon seeing his father, he threw his arms around the wizard's neck. Lucius wrapped one arm around Draco, and murmured into the child's ear, as he watched, with horror, as Hermione slipped from the coils of the Fiendish serpent. Her body seemed boneless as she dropped to the floor, and Lucius cried out.

Snape had fallen to his back, and watched in horror as Hermione fell like a rag doll to the floor. In all the furor, no one else saw George lifting himself from the floor where he had fainted. He stood straight, and tall, and as he moved smoothly towards Voldemort, an outline of a wraith of immense power shimmered around his body.

With not a word, the Philosopher's Stone slipped from the triumphant Fiend's fist and into George's. Voldemort screeched angrily. The eyes of Anubis beheld the Fiend, but Voldemort only saw a red-headed boy who had stolen his prize.

"Give me back the Stone, boy, or I shall crush you as I did the girl!" Voldemort threatened.

George's fist curled over the Stone, and with a burst of red, it crumbled to dust.

Over Voldemort's scream of anger, another voice, one that filled the ancient chamber, thundered through the bones of all present. "The Stone of Eternal Life was never yours. It belonged to me, and I have dealt with it."

The Fiend swam towards George, but found that the boy was inaccessible. An impenetrable force surrounded George; Anubis.

"You belong to me," the heavy timber of the voice made a sudden judgement, and this time, as the Fiend screamed; it was terror that sounded in the chamber.

The wind that had made it nearly impossible for anyone to move was now swirling like a small tornado around Voldemort. The faster it spun, the smaller it became, until the Fiend was gone. The wind seemed to slump towards the ground, spreading outward in a fine fog that became mist, and then vanished to nothing.

Lucius, freed from the force of that wind, rose unsteadily to his feet, since he still held Draco awkwardly in one arm. He stumbled over to Hermione, and fell to his knees, heedless of the sickening cracking sound they made on the sandstone floor. Unmindful of that pain, he let Draco slide to his side as he lifted Hermione into his arms. He cried out as her poor, broken bones shifted horribly within her skin. She did not breathe. Even as Lucius put his ear to his child's chest, Hermione's heart did not beat. Tears streamed down his face, and Draco, now on his knees, gripped his father's arm as he glanced fearfully at Hermione's unseeing gaze.

"Papa?" Draco asked so very softly.

Snape was with Poppy with his own son in his arms. He was watching George, who was watching the grief stricken father.

"Please do not take her, L-lord Anubis," begged Snape with a hoarse throat. He coughed horribly just as George turned the unnatural gaze of the Egyptian god upon the wizard.

"She was in possession of what belonged to me," the hard voice of Anubis surrounded all of them.

"It possessed... her!" asserted Snape. "Hermione never knew what the Stone was! She never knew it belonged to anyone!"

"She is my innocent daughter!" Lucius was finally able to say through his sobs, as he still cradled Hermione's body in his arms. "Dumbledore did this to her!" Anger spat forth from the older wizard, and his glare was matched by one upon Draco's face.

"Dumbledore." Anubis voice rumbled through the chamber, and dust fell from the ceiling causing all of them to cough.

"You know the truth, Lord!" called Snape as he sat up on the floor with Poppy's help. "The Philosopher's Stone was created by Nicholas Flamel and Albus Dumbledore. It was Dumbledore who brought the Stone to Hogwarts. He wanted to..."

Snape was suddenly interrupted by a gentle voice no one had heard in quite some time. Quirrell was sitting up, his eyes clear, his stutter gone. "I felt the Dark Lord in me desiring the Stone, venerable Lord Anubis." He bowed his head. Fred smiled at the respectful obeisance his professor showed to the god. "We came to Hogwarts because we were following the Stone. We heard its song. The Headmaster knew what was within my mind before I even realised what I was harboring." Quirrell's head lowered in shame.

Snape's voice thundered sharply, "He endangered everyone in Hogwarts! All of the children! If you take her I will make certain that her death lies heavily on that man's old head!"

George swept over to Lucius, and Draco. He knelt down, and his hand hovered over Hermione's head. All was quiet as the boy possessed by the god looked over the child. After several long minutes, George shook his head, almost sadly.

The voice filled them all again, "The child is dead. I am unable to take the dead from the hands of my brother Osiris without equal payment." George lifted his head, and terrible, burning dark eyes looked to Lucius, then to Snape, as the voice declared darkly,

"Osiris demands a death for a death. That is the only way she can be returned."

George crumpled slowly to the ground as the wind lifted up in the chamber, stirring the dust, and sand until no one could see anything. Then, as if it all suddenly drained away, they were returned to the small, cramped cell.

"A death for a death," echoed a far distant voice, the last words of Anubis. With that echo, the Hourglass of Anubis, which had been hovering over Quirrell's bed, exploded into a thousand splinters, causing those left in the tiny cell to cover themselves, and to protect themselves from the shards.

Albus Dumbledore sipped the tea that a house elf had brought. He had felt the surge of magic, and was content that Harry was on his way down to wherever his father was. He had discovered through the magic of Hogwarts that Quirrell had not escaped, as he had originally thought. The stuttering wizard was in the castle, but Hogwarts refused to reveal where the Defense Against the Dark Arts teacher was hidden.

All this the Headmaster had learned over the holidays. He was now also certain that Severus Snape no longer belonged to him. Severus was the one to hide Quirrell, which meant to him that the Potions Master had chosen his own path. Once the spirit of Voldemort was released in order for Harry to fulfill the Prophecy, Albus would do what was needed, and denounce his Head of Slytherin House to the Wizengamot.

The old wizard popped a sherbet lemon into his mouth. Perhaps, he thought idly, the Aurors will take Lucius Malfoy into Azkaban, as well.

Harry Potter.

The Headmaster smiled. With the Philosopher's Stone in Miss Granger's possession, he had been able to send Harry on his way to meet his destiny. Regardless of what Severus believed, the Prophecy would be fulfilled.

Albus took another, slow sip of his tea as a strange breeze of dry resin swept open the tower window. Putting down his tea, the Headmaster rose from his squashy chair, and over to the window.

The breeze stirred his beard, and rose up his robes, and around to his chest just as a scattering of sand swept in through the window. A tendril of that sand brushed lightly against Dumbledore's cheek. In that moment, catching the casement, Albus' eyes widened as he felt his heart tighten in his chest. The sand circled around him, almost helping the elderly wizard back over to his desk chair.

Fawkes wings beat in agitation, and then he sang. It was a trill of somber notes to ease his master.

A soft, yet distant, and thundering voice whispered in Albus' ear. "You have been judged, Albus Percival Wolfric Brian Dumbledore. Osiris awaits."

Albus gasped just as Fawkes flew over to him. The bird's crested head stroked the old man's cheek just as his eyes fluttered closed.

Once he knew that Quirrell was all right, Fred went to his fallen brother. George grinned up at his twin. "Have any chocolate, Gred?"

Fred rummaged in his robe pocket and pulled out a Chocolate Frog. "Here ya go, Forge."

On the other side of the room, Lucius was still holding the lifeless Hermione, and Draco, his fist still in his father's shirt, was trying to snuffle away his tears.

Snape, still feeling incredibly unsteady on his feet, forced his body to stand as he cradled his still unconscious son to his chest. He felt Poppy's arm slip around his waist as she moved her body expertly against his side so she could support him as they both walked/stumbled over to Lucius and his children.

Draco still had a fist in his father's robe, but his fingers were lightly petting Hermione's right hand which trailed limply on the floor in front of the child's knees. Lucius was still holding onto Hermione's body as carefully, and as gently as he could. Silent tears fell down upon his cheeks and further darkened the dead girl's robes.

Snape was leaning towards his friend so Poppy helped the dark man down to his knees on the other side of Lucius. She caught Harry's head as it dropped away from his father's chest.



"Severus," she whispered into his ear gently, but firmly. "Give Harry to me." Her arms were already curling under the limp child's body. Snape was looking to Lucius, then Harry, but he was not relaxing his grip on his son. "Severus!" Poppy said a little sharper.

It was Fred who moved away from Quirrell that went to his Potions teacher, and forcefully removed Snape's arms so Madame Pomfrey could take the child. Poppy seated herself on the floor beside Snape and positioned Harry in her lap so she could run a much needed Diagnostic Spell over him.

Fred whispered softly to his teacher, sounding awfully grown-up, "Sir, I'm sure Madame Pomfrey will take care of Harry just fine. I think Mr. Malfoy really needs you at the moment."

Snape stared at the red-haired boy that was leaning over him, and then glanced longingly at his son. Poppy was taking care of Harry, and as loathe as he was to turn away from his child, Lucius needed the strength of a friend. If only so that Draco would not become hysterical. He tried to stand, but his legs still felt like they had been hit by a Jelly-Legs Hex. Fred leaned down and helped his teacher to stand. In only a few seconds, they were both kneeling beside Lucius and his children.

Lucius' hand gently cupped Hermione's cheek, as he whispered to his friend. "I don't understand, Severus. She's innocent."

"I do not understand it, either, my friend," Snape spoke softly as he laid a hand upon Lucius' arm. "Come. We must leave. There is nothing we can do for..." Snape frowned. He could swear he just saw the girl's fingers twitch.

"Papa!" gasped Draco who was still petting the hand of Hermione's that had twitched. He tugged on his father's robes for the older wizard's attention. "Look!"

Lucius followed Snape, and Draco's gazes and saw Hermione's hand grasp convulsively. All of a sudden, she drew in a harsh breath, and let out a huge, single sob. "PAPA!" she cried out.

The elder Malfoy was in shock as Hermione threw her arms around her father's neck and continued to weep; her body convulsing with her sobs.

Stunned at Hermione's miraculous recovery Lucius gently slipped his arms around the girl's back. He expected to hear, to sense the disturbing sounds of crushed, and broken bones, but there werenone.

"She's perfectly healthy," whispered Snape who had waved a Diagnostic Spell over the girl. He had seen the ethereal snake kill Hermione, and he was dazed by the results of his spell.

"Wicked!" murmured Fred, and he smiled as he heard his twin's voice next to him.

At Hermione's cry, Poppy had risen to her feet with Harry still in her arms. She had cast a Featherlight Charm so he was nearly weightless to her. As she approached Lucius and Hermione, she cast swift Diagnostic Charms on Lucius, Hermione, and Draco.

"Hermione is fine, and a bit in shock," began Poppy. "Draco, Lucius, you just need some rest. However, Harry's skull has a hairline fracture that I need to attend to. At once. Come!" The medi-witch ordered, and without another word she led everyone out of the small cell.

Fred and George both wanted to stay awake to find out how the youngest Snape was, but magical exhaustion took them both over, and a few minutes after arriving in the Infirmary, both Weasley boys were asleep.

Lucius had given in to emotional exhaustion, clutching both his children to his body. Draco and Hermione, both blissfully asleep, were using their father's chest as a pillow as they cuddled into his sides.

Snape felt just as magically, and emotionally exhausted, but his son still had not awakened from having been slammed into an old stone column. Poppy, who had done everything she possibly could to heal several bruises, and the fracture in the child's small skull, sat on the other side of his bed. She was feeling terribly useless.

"As soon as Harry wakens, Poppy, that old man is going to get an earful from me," growled Snape. "He put their lives in danger. Hermione," he shuddered. The Potions Master could not determine

anything about her miraculous recovery, but her death, or near death, was Dumbledore's fault. "It is all his fault."

"Not entirely, Professor Snape," the quiet admonition came from Quirinus Quirrell who, for the last fifteen minutes, had been examining his head in the Infirmary mirror. Although bald, and apparently suffering from some scarring, his parasite was gone. He was now seated in a corner of the Infirmary, his eyes darting from the Malfoys to the Weasley twins, and then to small Harry. Harry, who to his eyes, seemed even smaller underneath the pristine white sheets, and bleached blanket.

Snape lifted his head, and glared at Quirrell. "I agree, Quirrell," he drawled hoarsely. "You are not entirely free from blame for you invited that aberration into your mind." He scowled sharply, not forgetting that the man's mind had been tortured by Voldemort.

"The greater iniquity is that of Albus," piped in Poppy. She brushed a hand over Harry's thin arm. "He knew what you were, Quirinus. He brought that accursed Stone into a school full of children." She, too, had seen the horror that the Fiend had wreaked in Quirrell's mind. "Perhaps you now understand the monster you courted, Quirinus," she admonished.

Quirrell only nodded in shame. "It would be best, don't you think, that I leave Hogwarts?"

"Yes. Leave!" spat Severus. He wasn't sure if he was truly angry with Quirrell, but he still worried for his son, and he was angry with Dumbledore. He wanted nothing more to do with that old manipulator, and down in the depths of the dungeons as they slowly walked up to the Infirmary, he had made his decision to leave. Hogwarts held nothing for him, and Harry needed a place that could offer him much more than an education.

"Severus," chided Poppy softly.

Quirrell walked slowly over to Harry's bed. He was careful because he knew he wasn't welcome after Snape's anger towards him. Despite what had been done to save his soul. "Why were the children down there?" he asked gently.

Poppy shook her head. Snape shrugged and slipped Harry's limp fingers into his hand. "I can only surmise that it was Hermione's possession of the Philosopher's Stone that led them to the Dungeon below the Dungeons. But, what sent them on their way? Was it entirely the Stone?"

The Infirmary Floo whooshed, drawing everyone away from their speculations. Remus Lupin's head appeared. "Poppy! Come to the Headmaster's office! Immediately!"

It seemed like it was only moments after Poppy had left the Infirmary at the Deputy Headmaster's command when her own face whooshed into life in the green flames.

"Severus, cast a Waking Alarm over everyone, and please come to the Headmaster's office."

A trickle of foreboding chill slid down the Potions Master's spine at the plea in the medi-witch's voice. As Snape stood, he quickly eyed the peaceful face of Hermione Malfoy curled against her father's side, with his arm protectively around her as they both slept. He quickly cast the Alarm Charm that would notify him if anyone woke while he was gone. He then threw the glittering, black powder into the flames, and called for the Headmaster's office.

Upon emerging through the Floo of the Headmaster's office, he found Remus standing impotently near the Headmaster's desk while Poppy was futilely utilising a Revive Spell upon Dumbledore. Her movements were frantic, and she looked up, worriedly at him.

"Poppy," Snape said softly as he walked over to her, and placed a hand over her wand hand. "Albus is gone." He shivered at the lingering smell of old resin, ancient dust, and the further tell of a scattering of sand beneath his boots.

The medi-witch's shoulders slumped as she turned into Snape, slipping her arms about his waist. He held her as her own dwindling energy, along with her grief, eroded the usually stoic, and business-like witch. He knew that as often as Dumbledore had vexed the woman, she had a touch of affection for the old man.

"Lupin?" Snape asked tersely.

Remus stepped forward. "Albus and I had some correspondence we needed to attend to at this time. When I came into the office..." He swallowed as a grimace crossed his features. "That sand. Severus, it was surrounding him." He paused as the Potions professor slid a boot over the offending sand. "When I called out Albus' name, it fell. I then went to Albus... there was nothing. It was as if, despite whatever that sand was, he had fallen asleep in the midst of having his tea."

Poppy pulled away from Snape, but remained close to his side as she wiped purposefully at her tears. "I need to call someone from St. Mungo's," she sighed. "The Ministry is going to want independent verification that Albus... that the Headmaster's death was natural." She stared down at the sand, then to Snape. Both of them knew that as natural as Dumbledore's death might appear to the authorities, it was not.

"A death for a death," murmured Snape so low that not even Lupin's wolfish hearing could discern the phrase. He then nodded to Poppy before turning to the Deputy Headmaster. "You're acting Headmaster, Lupin," began Snape stoically. "I think you might want to contact the Board of Governors."

Remus nodded. "I will do that after Poppy summons someone from St. Mungo's. As soon as Albus' death is verified, I have to seal the office until a new Headmaster is appointed." He shook his head as he regarded the passed Dumbledore. "I won't be staying."

With that pronouncement, the three disbanded to their duties.

A/N: Only the epilogue is left. I am so very sorry that it took me so long to post this. The trouble with my eyes escalated to the point that I simply could not use my computer comfortably. It also did not help that I was in the midst of acquiring new glasses, and it has not been easy. It is a long, drawn out story, and I shan't go into it here. Suffice it to say, that since my appointment at the beginning of March, I still do not have the right, new glasses. In a few days, I hope this to be finally remedied. The other delay was a Bronchial Irritation that I am still recovering from. It affected my hearing, thus, my balance. I had little imagination to finish the chapter, and the days I could make it to the computer, I spent over at Professor Snape's Tumblr blog.

I want to say a huge thank you to lastcrazyhorn who helped me these last few weeks and encouraged me to write when I was able. It might have been much longer before I finished this chapter if it hadn't been for her kind heart.

Finally, I will be delaying a possible sequel. I just cannot handle writing a story by myself, at the moment. At least, not the one I planned. I have chosen, instead, to work with lastcrazyhorn on a fluffy angst story, of which pieces have appeared on Professor Snape's Tumblr blog. I think it will be my spring/summer project.

Epilogue is last, and I do promise it will not take as long as this one did.

Saturday, Jan. 18th, 1992 - Late Evening

Snape, sitting beside his son's bed, straightened as he heard the voice of the new, acting Headmaster behind him. "They're gone."

"Lupin?" asked Snape flatly, not comprehending what the man meant by his statement. Although Snape was trying to call Remus by his first name out of courtesy (they weren't friends!), when he was tired, he still slipped and called the Deputy Headmaster by his last name. There was no malice intended, though.

"The team from St. Mungo's are gone," clarified Remus as he summoned a chair and sat down beside Snape. "They declared Albus' death as Natural Causes from old age. Nothing more. Albus' brother came to claim the body."

Snape frowned. "Aberforth? I thought he and Dumbledore had some sort of fallout when they were children."

Remus shrugged. He was so very tired. "I suppose old grudges don't matter when you're the last, surviving member of a family." Running his fingers exhaustedly through his hair, he mumbled, "Abe wants you at the funeral. No one else."

Snape, who was starting to drift off from sheer exhaustion, opened his eyes abruptly. "What? Me? Why?"

"Well, to be more precise, Abe said that you didn't have to attend the actual funeral itself, if you didn't want to, but he needed you to meet him at the cemetery because it would..." Remus closed his eyes, and pressed his fingers to the center of his forehead as he tried to recall the exact words he had been told. "Because Abe said, 'it'll only be when my miserable brother is beneath the dirt that I'm free'." Snape glowered in question at the werewolf, but Remus had no answer for him.

For a very long moment both men were silent. Snape used that moment to observe his nearly, sort of, almost (not!) friend, Remus Lupin.

Remus had not, surprisingly, settled in at Hogwarts. Even with help from Snape the paperwork that he was left to deal with as Deputy Headmaster was still designated, by Snape at least, as a nightmare.

If anything, Snape had decided that the worst of the essays he had ever had to read were more interesting than the mind-numbing nonsense that came through Lupin's office. Constant complaints from parents, endless Ministerial, Board of Governors, and even Wizengamot paperwork that had to be shunted to the Headmaster. Never-ending mess!

As the Head of Gryffindor House, Remus had taken better to that job than as Deputy Headmaster. Remus was very good with his Gryffindors, and Snape hated to admit it, but those students' manners had shown an improvement. They were still short-tempered, and dove in before thinking, but Remus had managed to instill manners to the lot of them that included a respect for ALL the Houses, and the teachers.

What stuck out the most for Snape was that for all of the werewolf's good points (yes, the wizard had them!), he simply did not look comfortable at Hogwarts.

Remus had managed, with the increase to his income, a passable wardrobe that was not threadbare, and worn. The wizard unfortunately had no taste beyond those out of date tweeds he insisted upon wearing. At meals he was quieter even than Snape, which was really saying something since Snape never invited conversation. With Remus, none of the staff seemed to pay him much attention.

One day, simply irritated with the man's apathy, which had nothing to do with the Full Moon arriving, Snape had demanded to know what it was Remus wished he were doing.

The Deputy automatically Incendio'd a Howler that was trying to dodge his wand. "Well?" asked Snape again as he put down his quill. "It is obvious to anyone taking a second look that this...!" he indicated the day's mound of paperwork, "... is not what you wish to be doing. So what is it? What would the quiet wizard that house's a werewolf really like to do - when he grows up?"

Remus smirked at the acidic absurdity of the man in black seated at a desk opposite him. Snape's sarcasm no longer took out chunks of flesh, as once it did. "Teaching is a fine thing, Severus, but I would much rather leave the magic to others. I did enjoy tutoring, and it is



something I would not mind expanding into a kind of 'little red schoolhouse' sort of thing."

"Why don't you?" asked Snape reasonably.

"Galleons, Severus. Something a man in my circumstances never has quite enough of."

Remus wasn't pitying himself, simply stating a fact.

Studying the man seated beside him, his blonde hair streaked with grey, and his age masqueraded by a network of thin scars, Snape decided that Hogwarts would one day kill the wizard.

And then, the Potions Master had an idea. Sunday, Jan. 19th, 1992

Harry woke in the early morning to sound of soft snoring to the right of his bed. Turning slightly, he could see that his father was stretched out on the top of one of the Infirmary cots, asleep. For a moment Harry just observed the man he now called 'dad'.

Severus Snape was a fierce wizard, in Harry's mind. Intense even. Snape expected a great deal of Harry, but after his relatives, who never had any expectation beyond the hysterical about him, Harry liked it. The swift smile faded to a frown. Well, not always. He had to eat vegetables, and whether he was starving or not, they never tasted any better than most of his father's potions. Especially cauliflower!

There was bedtime, too, but since even the seventh years had a bedtime, Harry didn't balk at that restriction. It was his father's insistence that homework **MUST** be done before any fun could be had that sometimes rankled. His father didn't always understand that Harry never had been able to just run outside after classes, and play games with his friends. This sometimes annoyed Harry because the other Slytherins got to go outside, but if his father saw him, he had to go do his homework.

Despite the vegetables, the homework, and any other time he got annoyed with his father, Harry had to gleefully remind himself that now he finally had a father to get annoyed with!

And, a father who protected him.

Pulling the blankets up closer to his chin, he tried to recall what he could of that day in that strange room with Quirrell, Draco, and Hermione, and their fathers, and Madame Pomfrey, and the twins. The moment he had stepped into the room it seemed he was flying through the air until he hit something with his head. Swimmingly, he was in and out of consciousness, and he had felt oddly unattached to his body. He remembered, though, as his father had reached out for him after he had been thrown across the room. Snape had wrapped arms and cloak over him, reluctant to let go of his son. In all that chaos, Harry had felt safe enough to let the darkness creeping at the edge of his consciousness draw him down.

He was curious about what happened after he couldn't remember anything else. His eyebrows beetled together in concern, and wonder. Were Draco, and Hermione all right? What about...?

"Hey, Little Snape," whispered a cheerful voice to Harry's left. He shifted, and smiled up at Fred and George Weasley.

The other Weasley, Harry was sure it was George, held up an armful of colourful sweets. "Look, Harry! Candy!"

The twins seated themselves, and Fred glanced over at the Potions Master who, oddly, had not awakened at their arrival. "Tired, is he?" Fred asked softly with a nod towards the bed their Potions teacher occupied.

"S'pose," Harry nodded. He reached for a strawberry sugar quill, opened it, and bit into the granulated, rock-crystal-like sugar. "Can you guys tell me what happened?" whispered Harry.

George leaned forward, and began to speak in a very near, sepulchral timber, "Well, Harry, at the moment you were thrown across the room..."

Harry listened like a much younger child drawn into some horrible Grimm's fairy tale. George embellished the events, but he was accurate in his portrayal. Harry gasped, his eyes wide, when George revealed that Anubis had possessed him.

"He was in you, George?" breathed Harry. "What was it like?"

George frowned, thinking. He had been aware of another presence within him. He had even tried to shout out to his brother, but he couldn't. "Weird," declared George. "As though someone else were borrowing my skin for a merry jaunt."

That rather terrified Harry. Fred reached out, and touched Harry's arm, patting it reassuringly. "George is fine now, Harry."

George jumped up from his chair and danced an impromptu jig to get Harry to laugh, which he did.

And, Snape, exhausted to the core, slept blissfully on.

Monday, Jan. 20th, 1992

Madame Pomfrey released father and son from the Infirmary just before breakfast on Monday. Classes had been cancelled for the week to honour the deceased Headmaster. Snape had tried to send Harry to Slytherin so that he could brew, and brood, over Dumbledore's death.

Harry, without his friends was in turns bored, and had far too much time to think. It was that morning he had learned about the Headmaster's death, and that his father would be the sole attendee at the old wizard's funeral.

Deciding he couldn't deal with his thoughts, and being alone, Harry had returned to his father's quarters, and slipped into the private lab where he expected to find his father brewing potions.

Snape had a whole list of simple potions to brew for Madame Pomfrey, and after an inadequate breakfast of coffee, he had raided his potions supply cabinet, and laid out all the necessary ingredients. As he began chopping Dandelion Root, the memories he had tried to avoid invaded his thoughts.

Snape had placed the Headmaster upon a pedestal, but not out of something as foolish as love. After what he had suffered, as a child, at the adult's authority as a Headmaster of his school, he had no love for Albus Dumbledore.

With the Dark Lord becoming more aggressive in his attacks, Snape had hoped that the venerable, and powerful man, had seen the

danger in prejudicing the Wizarding world against one House in Hogwarts. When Snape, realising his own, horrible, mistake at bringing evil to Lily's door, had confessed his sins to Dumbledore... he had hoped... not for absolution for himself, but perhaps a wisdom from the great wizard that would encompass Slytherin, his beloved House.

He would quickly learn that nothing changed.

Upon his first day as a teacher Snape had seen how not just most of the staff, but the Headmaster, had looked down upon, and ridiculed his House. At the Sorting Feast none of the children Sorted into Slytherin received any accolades beyond their new Head of House, and the other Slytherins. None of the staff applauded, and Dumbledore had done nothing. But a twinkle, and smile. It seemed that a twinkle of the blue eyes, and an indulgent smile, made the Headmaster's favouritism of his own Gryffindors, a forgivable thing.

Snape had vowed himself to Dumbledore in the fight against Voldemort, but the new Head of Slytherin House had made his own vow to the children of his House; he would stand up for them where no one else would, and he would do his best to keep them safe.

When Harry had been surprisingly Sorted into Slytherin, Snape had held out some vague hope that with the Boy-Who-Lived in his House, the Headmaster might look upon his Snakes differently. Any shred of respect, perhaps even fear that he'd had towards the great wizard fled in the face of Dumbledore seeing Harry as a threat because he was now a Slytherin.

"Hey, Dad?"

Startled by the small voice that shattered his grim thoughts Snape looked up from his brewing to see that his son had arrived. Harry had a slightly timid look to his face as his eyes darted around the room. It was a wariness that Snape had not seen in Harry's eyes for several months and it dismayed him to see it now, and to know that it had more than likely been the forces in the Dungeon under the Dungeon that had brought it back.

Snape opened his mouth to invite his son in, but both were interrupted by a startlingly loud clap of thunder with a concussive

force that knocked the Potions Master from his stool, and slammed the door shut behind Harry.

Harry would have run to assist his father, but there was a very large bird blocking the way. The bird trilled softly, then left the desktop it had appeared on, and hopped over to Snape's desk. By then, the professor had picked himself up.

"That's the bird that carried the Headmaster to where we were in the attics," said Harry pointing at the large bird that had red, orange, yellow, and gold plumage.

"That's Fawkes!" stated Snape incredulously. "Whatever is he doing here?"

"Maybe he misses Professor Dumbledore," offered Harry, taking a step closer to his father by skirting around his father's desk, and ducking the long tail feathers.

"Perhaps, but Fawkes is a Phoenix, Harry." As though drawn by the great bird, Snape stepped closer, and was surprised when Fawkes bent towards him, and rubbed the crest of his head against the older wizard's chest. Tentatively Snape drew his hand down the Phoenix's neck. "It is exceedingly rare for a Phoenix to live after its master dies. We all thought that is what happened to Fawkes since we could not find him."

"Seems to be right here," smirked Harry. He reached out his index finger to touch Fawkes' plump breast. "He's soft!"

"And, you should be dead," muttered Snape to the bird.

Fawkes gave Snape something of a cross-eyed look of annoyance, and then trilled out a strange, staccatto squawk. Snape frowned, and the Phoenix repeated itself.

Something awakened in Snape's mind. A presence, but it did not speak to him in words. He received a sense of gentle power, and magic, and in that sense he knew that he had been chosen by the Phoenix.

Blinking in astonishment, Snape whispered, "Are you sure you wish to choose me as your new master, Fawkes?"

Fawkes nodded, and trilled happily. Harry's eyes widened. "Is he your familiar now, Dad?"

"So it would seem," breathed Snape. He wasn't just surprised, but he was shocked. He now had a familiar... and a Phoenix at that!

Sunday, Jan. 26th, 1992

Snape eyed his black dress robes as he stood before the full-length, oval mirror in his bedroom. The robes were new, and of the blackest black of wool, and silk. A part of him felt they were too good for Dumbledore, but he pushed away the thought.

It was time to forgive.

Turning away from the mirror, he strode into his sitting room, and was startled to see his son standing in the middle of the room. Harry was dressed in one of the suits of dress robes Snape had purchased earlier when he had adopted Harry.

"What are you doing here, Harry?" frowned Snape.

Harry took a deep breath. "I know you said only you were invited to the funeral, but I'm going." Snape scowled, and Harry braved the look by stepping forward one step. "Dad, we're family, right?" Snape nodded, still puzzled, but he listened. "Well, I think we should stand together as a family and say goodbye to Professor Dumbledore."

Snape gave his son a firmer nod, and added, "I think you are quite right, Harry." Placing his palm between his son's shoulder blades, the Snape family stepped into the Floo.

Seconds later, Harry and Snape arrived through the Leaky Cauldron's Floo. Without speaking to any curious by-standers, Snape led them both out of the tavern, and to an Apparation Point. Tucking his son against his side, Snape spun, and with a subtle crack, they were gone.

Harry wobbled slightly after Side-Along Apparation with his father. Snape caught the boy, and helped him to get steady before allowing the boy a few minutes to look around.

Upon seeing a number of headstones nearby, nestled in an overgrowth of grass, Harry stepped uneasily a little closer to Snape. They were in a small cemetery that appeared neglected, perhaps even long since abandoned. Even so, it had a tranquil air to it that once Harry took a breath of the clean breeze, he relaxed.

"Is this where the Headmaster is going to be buried, Dad?" whispered Harry.

"Not quite," hesitated Snape. "It will be just a bit further on. I thought you might wish to visit someone first."

Harry glanced back over his shoulder in puzzlement at his father wondering what he could mean. Snape placed a heavy hand on his son's shoulder, turning the boy slightly to face him. With a soft sigh, he replied to the unasked question, "Your mother and father were buried here, Harry."

Harry's eyes widened, and his mouth opened in a silent gasp. Part of him had always wondered, but a smaller part had never had the nerve to ask where they were. "Take a breath, child, and look over there." Snape was pointing just over Harry's shoulder.

Harry did take a breath, but he did not immediately face where his father was pointing. When Snape gently patted his cheek, the small boy breathed in, and turned.

He wasn't sure what he was expecting at this moment, but Harry felt odd, exhilarated, and infinitely sad. Just a few steps away were two gravestones. Unlike the others nearby that showed the ravages of the elements, and tendrils of spidery lichen, the stones marking his parents final resting places were clean. Upon each stone was also a wreath of flowers: lilies, and poppies.

Stepping a bit closer Harry could sense the magic that surrounded the stones, and the graves. He did not realise that he had been kneeling on the grass between the two graves until he stretched out a hand to touch the deeply carved letters that spelled his mother's name.

"Hi, Mum," the child whispered. He felt a little nervous, somewhat giddy, but sad, too. Harry's fingers then traced his father's name in the stone. "Hi, Dad." It felt like a very long time in which Harry did

not want to move, nor did he quite know what to do. Just when Snape was intending to pull his son away, and end the silence, Harry spoke again. "I miss you both," he sighed. "I'm pretty sure you both miss me, too." He smiled gently. "I think... yeah..., no, I know I want to tell you, Mum and Dad, that I'm happy now. My Dad..." he turned, and held out his hand to Snape.

Snape hesitated, but when his son's hand remained beckoning to him, he grasped the small fingers, and knelt down, awkwardly beside the boy.

"I really love my Dad, and he loves me, so we're both happy, and it's all fine, now." For a moment longer they were both silent, and then Harry turned abruptly and wrapped his arms around Snape's neck, and climbed into the man's lap, and wrapped his legs around his father's waist.

The professor knew what Harry's gesture meant, and so with the assistance of a Featherlight Charm, a careful rise to his feet, Snape stood, carrying his son in his arms.

It was only a few minutes later that Snape was met by a tall, old man with over-hanging eyebrows of grey, and similar grey hair that fell to his shoulders. His eyes were a watery blue, much like those of Albus Dumbledore's. Snape knew this was Aberforth.

A scowling faced man, Aberforth Dumbledore usually wore breeches, and a rather suspect looking vest over a large, stained blouse. Today, no doubt in respect of his younger brother, Aberforth wore long white dress robes.

"What'cha got there, Severus?" queried Aberforth gruffly as he peered at Harry.

Harry quickly slid from his father's grasp, and Snape let his son stand upon the ground. "This is my son, Harry," replied Snape. "Harry, this is the Headmaster's older brother, Aberforth."

Harry stuck out his hand, "Sorry about your brother, Mr. Dumbledore."

"Jus', Abe, Harry." Aberforth grasped Harry's hand and shook it so firmly Harry thought he might lose a few teeth.



Aberforth turned sharply to the right and pointed towards a new looking Headstone. "Buried 'im already, they did. Best that way."

"Was there not a ceremony?" asked Snape slightly puzzled as he moved closer to the headstone that held no singular aspect other than the name of the grave's occupant.

The grizzled Aberforth shook his head. "Din't need any o' that nonsense. Be a lotta bloody reporters, cameras... nonsense." The older wizard scowled at the headstone as if it were personally responsible for his lot in life. "Prob'ly not what he wanted, but that sorta don't matter none. Respectable place, this is." He nodded, and glanced briefly around. His gaze then froze upon another stone. This headstone was dark grey with age, covered with lichen, and a tree branch had fallen partly over it.

Harry's attention had been caught by the headstone, and he read the only name upon it aloud, "Ariana."

Snape caught a quick flicker of pain in the older man's eyes. "Harry, do not stray, please." The order was soft, but firm. Harry quickly moved back to his father's side.

"Abe, I..." began Snape as he wondered what he had been invited to the funeral for.

The older wizard shoved a crystal phial towards Snape. The Potions Master almost recoiled as he recognised the wispy elements that drifted about in the glass container. They were memories. I have quite enough of my own, he thought vehemently, I do not need any of Dumbledore's.

Aberforth, perceiving the younger man's slight flinch, pulled the phial of memories away. He scowled at them. "Don't blame ya, Severus," groused Aberforth. "I wouldn't'a be givin' them to ya, but Albus made me swear him a Wand Oath that I'd keep 'em, and give 'em to ya if somethin' happened to him." Under his breath, the old wizard hissed at the new stone, "If'n somethin' din't happen to you firs'!"

Snape blanched for he had heard the near whisper, and it chilled him. It had been one thing to know that in his duties for the Order of the Phoenix the younger wizard had accepted that death might be

his only reward, it was disheartening to hear someone else voice that truth.

"They are Albus' memories," Snape stated unnecessarily, and breaking the tense silence. Aberforth nodded. "Of what?"

Aberforth shrugged, but then grimaced. He then gruffed, "Albus wanted ya to know he weren't all bad. That he cared about'cha." Snape's gaze narrowed darkly, and the old wizard nodded. "Look, Severus, I never much liked my baby brother. Din't care for the way he swaggered about like some Gryffindor hero alla time. Like he knew what was right, an' nobody else did. He's not blameless, despicable, mebbe..." Aberforth shook his shaggy, grey head. "My vow ends when ya take 'em, Severus. Watch 'em or no'; it's up to you. Personally, I think it's just another way of him manipulin' the situation to what he wanted. Change what ya might be thinkin' of him."

Reluctantly, Snape relieved old Aberforth of the memories. Harry stared curiously at them, then at the older wizard.

Aberforth turned and walked several feet away. Without looking behind him, he spoke sharply, "I'd toss 'em if I was ya, Severus!"

The old, bitter sounding wizard hurried away until in the distance Snape and Harry could hear the sharp crack of Apparition.

Snape was still staring at the phial of Dumbledore's memories when Harry looked worriedly up at his father.

"Dad...?" Harry's hand covered the phial, touching his father's fingers. His voice was heavy with worry, and concern.

Snape broke his gaze from the memory phial, and looked down at his son. "Harry? What is it?" There was a touch of irritation in his voice that caused Harry to flinch slightly.

"I think you should do what Abe... Mr. Dumbledore said." He tried to take the phial from his father, but Snape's fingers were still firmly wrapped around the crystal.

Wrapping his fingers completely around the phial, Snape tucked the memories into his frock coat's inner pocket.

"Home, Harry," Snape said simply gathering the young child to his side. The cracking sound of the Apparation sounded angry.

Wednesday, Jul. 1st, 1992

Despite the near emptiness of Hogwarts since all the students left at the end of term, Harry mostly occupied himself by playing with Fang, helping Hagrid plant seeds, and taking meals with his father.

He had heard no more about the old Headmaster's memories in the bottle, and Harry had not asked his father about them. The day they had come home from the funeral, Snape had closeted himself in his private lab, and had not spoken to his son at all.

After the day of Dumbledore's funeral, Snape had thrown himself into his end of term work. He finished up the grading for all of his classes, inspected the dorms of Slytherin House, and did his Potions supplies, and ingredients inventories.

This Wednesday Harry said his farewells to Fang and Hagrid, and was busy packing his trunk down in his father's dungeon quarters.

"Dad?" Harry wandered to his father's room where the man was neatly packing some books into his trunk. "Where are we going?"

"I shall enlighten you as to our destination when our guests arrive for lunch," replied Snape with the shadow of a smirk upon his lips.

Harry slouched in disappointment. He had been attempting to get the secret to their vacation retreat out of his father for the last few days. For a few seconds he glared at the floor, then looked up again, smiling slightly. "Guests?"

Snape had ordered lunch to be setup on a balcony just off the Great Hall. He and Harry arrived early, and although Harry was curious about their guests, he was also mesmerised by the view from the balcony that overlooked a wide portion of the grounds, and Professor Sprouts greenhouses. Snape was inspecting the table setting when he glanced towards his son, and saw Harry leaning rather precariously against the balcony's rail. With a quick stride, he caught Harry by the collar of his robes, and tugged gently.

"After all you have gone through, do you really wish to fall that great distance to the ground?" asked Snape a bit too sharply.

Harry quickly apologised, and shrugged away from his father's grip. He could not figure out his father. One minute he appeared at ease with the world, the next it seemed to Harry that his very presence irritated the older wizard. The weeks since the Headmaster's funeral had caused a perceptible distance between father and son, and Harry didn't like it.

He spoke up, bravely, almost like a Gryffindor, and asked timidly, "Dad, are you mad at me?" Snape frowned, not entirely understanding what precipitated such a question. Harry moved over to the table and sat down in one of the chairs, facing his father. "Well, you've been quiet, you know?" he began as he picked up a napkin, and started folding it nervously. "Ever since the funeral, and you were given... those memories." He shrugged, and worried a corner of the cloth napkin between his fingers. "Most times you're sorta all right, but then you snap, or yell at me, and I'm pretty sure I didn't do anything wrong."

Snape sighed, realising his behavior had been terribly erratic of late. He sat down at the table beside his son, and bent so that his elbows rested on the top of his knees. Although not an entirely comfortable position, it allowed him to sit eye-to-eye with his child.

"Harry, I do apologise to you. You are quite right in that you have done nothing to earn my ire. Those memories..." he sighed as he tried to think of what he might say. Claspings his hands together tightly, he began again, "Those memories from the Headmaster... I have not been able to decide if I should look at them, or be rid of them."

Harry gulped sympathetically. "What are they of? Are they bad?"

"They could shatter me," Snape sighed in a very low voice. He cringed as he had not meant for his son to have heard his utterance. Looking into Harry's eyes he was only further worrying, and confusing the boy. "Harry, at one time I held a great respect for Albus Dumbledore. I think I may have... even harbored affection for him. There was a time he was as the father my own had not been." He straightened his back, not letting go of his son's gaze. "However, he betrayed me, not just this year, but many times before that." He

glowered slightly. "I was too stupid to realise it, at the time, and perhaps I would not have seen his manipulations this year had it not been for the fact that he put you in danger. He hurt, and betrayed you. I am sorry that I allowed that, Harry. An apology for my lapse is inadequate."

Harry dropped the napkin to the ground, and quickly slid off his chair to press himself between his father's knees, and wrap his arms around his waist, hugging Snape ferociously.

"I'm all right, Daddy," he assured his father firmly. "I trust you, and I know you're always going to protect me, no matter what." Snape smiled bitterly down upon his forgiving child, a cheek pressed against his sternum. Harry sighed as a comforting hand was drawn down his hair, and settled upon the back of his neck.

The little moment ended as Remus arrived, looking tired. He smiled wanly, though, intent upon enjoying this little lunch he had been invited to.

Snape could see that the exhaustion threaded through Remus' slightly stooped frame was from the additional paperwork he had inherited with the Headmaster's death. Snape had offered his assistance one night, and had simply been rebuffed with an alarming, rather wolfish snarl.

"Remus, I have a new potion that you would be perfect for testing," announced Snape as he pointed at a chair at the table, and bade the man to sit.

"Hi, Professor Lupin!" interjected Harry as he resumed his seat.

"Hello, Harry," he gave the boy a smile as he occupied a seat, and then gave the Potions Master a curious glance. Snape nodded to him, and simply held out his hand for an amber phial that had zoomed its way up from the dungeons after being Summoned.

Snape caught the potion, and brought it over to the weary wizard. He held it out. "It is a Revitalising Potion..."

Remus interrupted, "Those don't work for me, Severus."

"Of course they don't, wolf," snapped Snape irritably. "This one will. Drink it."

Remus took the phial, and regarded it skeptically for a moment. Snape's scowl became darker, and before the Potions Master could force it down his throat, he tipped it back.

Almost immediately, Remus felt a waking warmth slip smoothly through his bones, and veins. He straightened, blinked, and drew in a welcome, sighing breath. He smiled gratefully at the dark-haired wizard who was now eyeing him smugly.

"It works beautifully, Severus! What did you do?" asked Remus.

Snape seated himself, and put a biscuit on Harry's empty plate. The boy's impatience had emerged with a rhythmic thumping of his heels against the legs of his chair. Harry's face brightened at the sight of the biscuit, and the thumping stopped the moment he bit into the sweet, tasting buttery and caramel treat.

"There are quite a few potions that we witches and wizards take for granted. We don't think twice about their ability to work. However, such potions as Pepper-Up, Skele-Gro, and other healing potions either take a long time to work, or not at all, for werewolves. I have begun a line of standard potions that take into consideration the werewolf that exists even when it is quiescent."

"What does that mean?" asked Harry, licking at some tasty crumbs on his lower lip.

Snape smirked, "It means, Harry, that even though Professor Lupin does not look like his wolf, at the moment, it is still a part of him. In order to heal him properly, his wolf side must be taken into consideration in the formulation of those potions not compatible with the werewolf within."

Remus smiled. "That is great, Severus! It would be nice to not have to suffer a cold in my dressing gown, a box of tissues, and before the fire."

"A much needed improvement, no doubt." Snape slipped a scroll over to the werewolf. "This should help, as well."

Remus frowned at the scroll, but then lifted it, broke the seal, and unrolled it. As he read it, his eyes widened in disbelief. Finally he looked up. "Severus! This is your home! I can't take this!"

Snape shook his head. Harry had slipped from his seat to move by Remus' elbow so he could see what the document was. Silently he read the largest words: Deed to 1313 Spinner's End.

"Yes, you can. It hasn't been my home for a very long time, Remus." He closed his eyes against the fleeting memories of the past. "It never really was a home," he murmured, mostly to himself. A little louder he added, "And, in truth, I would much rather purchase something closer to Hogsmeade. Something with a large yard for Harry, and perhaps near other children his age to interact with during the Summers." Harry glanced up sharply at hearing his name. "However," sighed Snape. "After you see the place, you may not think it quite a gift. It has been neglected for a very long time."

"Is the neighborhood wizard or Muggle?" asked Remus.

"It was Muggle when I grew up there, but Lucius, who has been looking for a new project, bought the land." Snape smirked at Remus' wide-eyed glance. "About a year ago. I understand that as a wizarding neighborhood the place is looking much better."

Remus took a deep breath, looking down at the deed once more. "It will take a great deal of work, Remus," continued Snape. "But I believe it would suit your 'little red schoolhouse' admirably. That, and with the growth of a new neighborhood, children are going to require a place of learning."

Remus was quiet, still regarding the gift before him. It was unexpected. To be receiving such a gift from the wizard that had practically hated him for so long... just as Remus was about to get embarrassingly sappy, Harry nudged his elbow, and smiled.

"Can I see your schoolhouse when it's built, Professor?" Silently Snape thanked his son for derailing the emotional wolf. Harry, being quite serious, smiled up at his teacher.

Remus smiled back, "Maybe you'd like to help me with it, Harry. But, after I clean it all up."

"Sure! I can draw plans, and colour them, and stuff. It will be really cool!"

"What will be cool?" Poppy Pomfrey, in a simple dress of homespun cotton in a graduated wash of fading Autumn colours, stood in the doorway to the balcony. As her uniform was gone, so was her familiar medi-witch's cap. Her hair, a deep golden honey sprinkled with highlighting strands of silver, had been released from its usual severe bun. Her only other ornamentation was a simple necklace of silver chain that held a simple emerald. Her fingers touched the small gem at her throat as all eyes fell upon her.

Remus' jaw dropped open slightly. He had never seen this side of Hogwarts' medi-witch. He had no idea this lovely woman lay beneath the starched uniform, and business-like exterior.

Snape's dark eyes became darker as the hint of a smile touched his lips. He drew in an appreciative breath, and then his gaze rested upon the necklace that dropped to the divot in her throat. He had been so certain that she would not wear it. In fact, he had expected the gift to be politely returned, and that perhaps she would not come to lunch.

"Poppy," he rose from the table, and strode over to her. He slipped her hand into the crook of his arm. "We are very pleased you could join us."

The medi-witch's cheeks blushed, but she salvaged most of her composure as she and Snape reached the table, and he helped her into a chair.

"You look really nice, Madame Pomfrey," Harry smiled. His compliment eased away the last of her nervousness.

"Thank you, Harry. Thank you for the invitation, Severus." He nodded, as he tapped the table for the salad. Poppy turned to the acting Headmaster. "How are you faring, Remus?"

"Tired," he acknowledged. "The Board of Governors has promised that I will not retain my position here for very long, thank Merlin."



Snape tossed the large bowl of salad that had appeared. While he served each of his guests, he asked, "Have they a candidate for the position already, Remus?"

"It seems so, Severus," he took a few bites of his salad. Harry glowered at his.

To Harry, lunch passed by with polite, yet adult... and sometimes boring... conversation. Pudding had been a luscious cheesecake flavoured with raspberry liqueur, and decorated with plump raspberries. Harry had nearly inhaled the confection. Consequently, he was finished before the adults were who were eating the cheesecake in small bites, with tea in between.

Harry let his head drop back against the top of his chair which allowed him a view of the balcony ceiling, and a fair bit of clear blue sky. As he watched, an odd looking, skeletally black creature that resembled a very skinny horse with wings flew overhead with a flock of birds. Watching the flight of the odd creature, and the birds, he began to hum, effectively tuning out the adults.

When Harry's disjointed hums were joined by the thumping of his heels against the legs of his chair, the conversation between Snape, Remus, and Poppy ended abruptly. Harry wasn't aware of it.

"Harry!" Snape's voice, after the third call, finally penetrated whatever daydream had taken the boy away, and Harry abruptly shifted so he was sitting upright. Remus chuckled softly, and Poppy smiled with quiet mirth as Harry's eyes wobbled in his head briefly. A wave of lightheadedness had swept his senses as he had raised his head.

Harry blinked rapidly and focused upon his father, who was frowning, but not terribly so. "Dad?"

"Getting bored, son?" asked Snape whose frown slid effortlessly into a smirk.

"Uhm... well," Harry glanced guiltily at Professor Lupin, and Madame Pomfrey.

"Did you hear where you'll be vacationing, Harry?" asked Remus with a knowing gleam to his amber gaze.

Harry frowned, and shook his head. "Where are..." but he was suddenly distracted as the great flying beast swept close to the balcony. Harry let out a yelp, dove from his chair, and from between his father's side, and right arm, he watched the terribly thin animal let out a snort, dive, and then sweep its powerful wings so that its body was lifted up, and away from the castle.

"Harry? Did you see the Thestral?" asked Snape worriedly as he drew his son to stand in front of him.

"Is that what the flying horse was, Dad?" Harry inquired as he watched the Thestral vanish in the distance.

"There is a small herd of Thestrals in the Forbidden Forest," replied Snape. He glanced at Poppy, who was frowning with a question in her eyes. Snape was certain it was the same question he had. How could Harry see the Thestrals.

"I thought Harry had been knocked unconscious before Hermione was..." a very dark warning from Snape had Remus clacking his mouth shut against his outburst.

"Harry did not see what happened to Miss Granger, although he has been told," Snape grit out.

Snape glanced down at his son, and was taken aback by the boy's annoyed glower. "What's a Thestral got to do with Hermione?" he demanded.

Snape's mind raced. Harry had not seen Hermione's death in the cell in the Dungeon Under the Dungeons, and Professor Quirrell had lived, although he had made himself scarce since then. "I am not certain how you saw it, child, since the legend is that only someone who has seen... death..." he began to explain slowly, but then the wizard realised something about his young son; Harry HAD seen death! Snape's hand clutched at a sharp pain in his chest. Harry had witnessed the death of his mother.

"Thestrals are remarkable creatures, Harry," interrupted Remus as he, too, suddenly understood what was causing Snape to clutch at his heart. "It is said that no one is able to see a Thestral unless they have witnessed someone's death."

Snape's lips thinned angrily at the werewolf for explaining what he seemed unable to do so. Harry, though, nodded sagely. "I saw my mum die." His words were simple, and every adult at the table felt their heart break a tiny bit for Harry.

Harry didn't quite like all the sorrowful gazes that looked down upon him, so he knew it was up to him to stop whatever this was that had made Remus, Madame Pomfrey, and his father sad. He smiled at his father, and inquired, "So, where are we going for vacation, Dad?"

"King's Island," replied Snape as he sat up, and motioned Harry to take his seat again. "It is an old, wizarding fishing village of the coast of New England in America."

"So we don't have to worry about magic?" asked Harry eagerly.

"Not at all, Harry. We shall get to go to the beach, where you may swim, and we shall even be able to see real, working wizarding ships." Snape was pleased by the excited glimmer in his child's luminous eyes.

"You mean like pirate ships?"

Remus and Poppy chuckled while Snape smiled. "No pirates, Harry, but you will enjoy them just the same."

"Can Draco and Hermione visit us?" entreated Harry. "I don't think I can go a whole Summer without them."

"I will write to Lucius and Narcissa. If their plans for the Summer can fit in a trip, I believe we will be able to accommodate them."

"Great! So when do we go?"

"In just an hour. We have a portkey to take us." Snape then cleared his throat, and glanced nervously at the medi-witch. "I did ask someone to join us on our vacation, Harry."

Harry was too excited to manage a frown of puzzlement, so he simply asked, and watched as his father hesitated. A very slight blush rose to the older man's cheeks, and he coughed slightly. "Who, Dad?" Harry demanded.

"I have asked Madame Pomfrey to join us, if that is all right with you?"

Harry turned to Poppy. "Can you swim, Madame Pomfrey?"

She laughed softly. "I most certainly can! Do you mind that I am coming?"

Harry shook his head. "Nope!"

Remus had seen Harry, Poppy, and Snape to the Apparation point outside of the gates of Hogwarts where Snape removed a battered bugler's horn from within his robes inner pocket.

Snape directed Harry to take hold of the bugler's horn, which he promptly did. He snickered to himself as he saw his father's fingers from his hand drift over Madame Pomfrey's fingers. Snape harrumphed at Harry, who just broke out in giggles, and Poppy blushed.

"Get ready," warned Snape. "Five, four, three, two, one!"

And, they vanished.

Remus was just about to turn back to the castle when his keen eyesight caught a sparkling glimmer of something in the dewy grass. He looked down at the ground. There, in the remains of one of Snape's bootprints, was the shattered remnants of a crystal phial. Its contents, shimmering wisps of pearl wizarding memories, spread out like tendrils before sinking into the earth, never to be seen again.

A/N: A great apology to everyone who waited so long for this epilogue, I am most sorry. Events at home became too much, and my writing was interrupted way too often. I then hit the dreaded "writer's block". I thank the dear Lastcrazyhorn who pulled me through, and who helped with her thoughts and ideas on this Epilogue.

I thank all of my readers for their lovely, and heartfelt comments, for without each and every one of you, I am nothing.

For anyone interested, a video has been made to illustrate this story.  
You will find a link to it on my profile.

\*bows\*